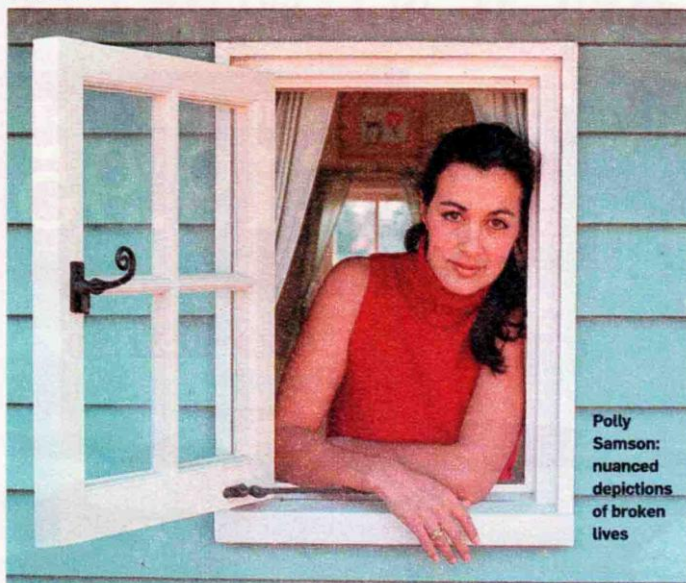


Fiction



Polly Samson: nuanced depictions of broken lives

Fully connected

The clever entwining of the tales in Polly Samson's assured collection results in a cogent and original take on short fiction

LUCY SCHOLES

PERFECT LIVES

by POLLY SAMSON
Virago £15.99 pp256

Perfect Lives, Polly Samson's second collection of short stories, sets its title against its epigraph: Leonard Cohen's assertion that "there is no perfection", "that this is a broken world and we live with broken hearts and broken lives".

This is a collection of stories about "stains that don't wash out, scars that never fade". Each is the tale of someone picking their way through the wreckage of a "perfect life" shattered. An ill-thought-through revelation made by a party guest that sends shock waves through a happy marriage; the promise of a celebrated career as a concert pianist ruined by debilitating stage fright; or the everyday reality of learning to live in the aftermath of a painful breakup: "The voice that always said to her 'I love you' in the casual way that other people said 'Good morning'. The timbre and tone as familiar as her own, so it was hard to adjust to the idea that this voice no longer wished to speak to her, no longer wished to wish her well." Seeing what the casual observer misses, Samson exposes the underbelly of lives that on the surface appear perfect.

Yet it is not merely this common ground that ties Samson's tales together. They are all set in and around the same small seaside town — to one bitter woman a "grim" façade of "Victorian pretensions" and bedsits riddled with "rising damp", while her own daughter remains happy to cling "like

a barnacle" to the very same life that upsets her mother so — and each character reappears with reassuring regularity as these friends, family members, colleagues and lovers drift in and out of each other's lives.

All the stories are so carefully and cleverly connected that the more one reads, the more novel-like the collection becomes. With every character's reappearance Samson brings each one more fully to life; showing them from another's perspective or illuminating a previously shadowy element of their past. Even a much-loved dress from the first story appears again in a later tale. A beloved addition to the wardrobe of both girls who own it, the frock suggests images to each of them that couldn't be more different. Having been caught by her future parents-in-law in a comical amorous encounter with a naked statue in their garden, the first wearer forever after feels "a little bit the slattern in the yellow dress". Yet when it resurfaces some 20 years later as the vintage eBay purchase of a teenager, the younger character fears its belt of embroidered daisies will make her look "a bit childish" in front of her father's friends.

Samson is an accomplished writer who, with this intertwined collection, has produced an original and compelling take on short fiction. She makes everyday tragedies her subject matter, but forever errs on the side of optimism. Like her character Tilda, a picture restorer who excels at "small fiddly work", Samson's nuanced depictions of these broken lives are moving without being sentimental, ultimately exposing the "gleam within the gloom".

Available at the Sunday Times Bookshop
price of £14.39 (including p&rp) on 0845 271 2135