

# The snakes within

**TOBY LICHTIG**

**A THEATRE FOR DREAMERS  
POLLY SAMSON**

348pp. Bloomsbury Circus. £14.99.

**S**INCE HIS DEATH IN 2016, Leonard Cohen has found a new lease of life as the subject of other people's art. Much of the focus has been on the years he spent on the Greek island of Hydra with a group of artists and writers during the 1960s, a period when he failed to make waves as a novelist but laid the foundations for his *Tower of Song*.

Nick Broomfield's documentary, *Marianne and Leonard* (2019), looked at Cohen's on-off relationship with Marianne Ihlen (the subject of one of Cohen's best-known ballads); later this year Fabien Greenberg and Bård Kjøge Rønning are set to release another documentary, *Little Axel*, about Marianne's son, who spent his early years on Hydra, with Cohen briefly playing the role of a very part-time father. Sue Smith's play *Hydra* (2019) centred on the lives of Cohen's literary friends, the Australians Charmian Clift and George Johnston, who were already mainstays of the island's expat community when Cohen first got off the boat. Now Polly Samson's new novel, *A Theatre for Dreamers*, releases a fictional protagonist into the bohemian viper's nest to provide a perspective of her own.

Eighteen-year-old Erica, still mourning her beloved mother, has fled her cruel and domineering father for an adventure in the Mediterranean sun.

She sets off from dreary London with her bouncy boyfriend Jimmy and brooding brother Bobby, speeding across Europe in their mother's "porcelain green" convertible. It is 1960 and on the way she encounters her first croissant; her first aubergine and globe artichoke will follow.

On Hydra she attaches herself to Charmian Clift (her mother's old friend) and quickly submits herself to a regime of apparent liberation and enthrallment - and actual servitude. Jimmy is writing poems; Bobby is painting. The various women on the scene seem to flit about, tending to their men's needs. "Don't let the buggers clip your wings", warns Charmian, a successful writer who still does the vast bulk of the childcare for her three "free-range" children, as her husband George, recovering from tuberculosis, bashes angrily away at his typewriter. George takes a dim view of the arrivistes - "We're getting overrun with people writing bloody novels" - but he still boozes with the worst of them, never hesitating to level an insult.

Over the ensuing months, Erica comes, if not of age, then to a semblance of maturity. There is a betrayal by Jimmy, arguments with Bobby, attempts to get closer to Charmian. Days are spent lounging in the sun, fetching ice blocks up the hill, making love and keeping house; evenings flow by in a haze of retsina and dope, gossip and debate, flirting and faithlessness. A charming would-be author arrives early on: "Leonard is courteous ... every girl has fallen under his spell". One of those girls is Marianne, whose demented husband, the writer Axel Jensen, has just run off with an artist, leaving her holding the baby. A love affair ensues, though the



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courtly Canadian can also be a cad. He tries, in his way, to be free. He may even have designs on Erica.

*A Theatre for Dreamers* is a thoroughly enjoyable drama of hedonism, enchantment and emotional beastliness, stretched over an elastic summer of new horizons and disappointments. Though the Hydra story is well known, Samson brings fresh life to the real characters, while wisely keeping the focus on her fictional narrator. The research is commendable but never overwhelms the narrative; you do not need to know anything about Pat Greer or Gregory Corso, Johnston, Clift, or even Cohen, to enjoy this tale of a young woman's sentimental, and often painful, education. Samson's writing is well paced and convincing, even if the sumptuousness can occasionally be engulfing ("the great ball of the sun emblazons the sea by unfurling its bolt of orange satin"); and there is even a nice plot twist - taken from real life but retrofitted to impact on Erica - involving an adopted baby. Cohen himself is, perhaps wisely, kept rather peripheral. He is polite and solicitous, speaks "slowly and seriously"; he quells arguments "by force of pure charisma". When he bashfully gives a reading after dinner, we are told: "He's certainly not born to performance". Samson has some fun with his lyrics: "birds gather on wires", Jimmy has curls "like [some kind of] gypsy boy"; one chapter begins (echoing "Famous Blue Raincoat"), "It's four in the morning".

Aside from these amusements, the novel has much to say about the dawn of an era when women's "liberation" largely involved a transfer from one form of patriarchy to another. "We were innocent children", Marianne reflects of that summer, when she meets up with Erica several years later. But, as Cohen sang of those early days, they were only "almost young". And some were more innocent than others. ■