
LITERARY FICTION

by **CLAIRE ALLFREE**



A THEATRE FOR DREAMERS

by Polly Samson

(Bloomsbury

£14.99, 368pp)

THE relationship between Leonard Cohen and his Norwegian muse Marianne Ihlen, for whom he wrote *So Long*, Marianne among others, has already been told on film and it appears again in Polly Samson's heady new novel, set among the Bohemian enclave of artists and writers that gathered on the Greek island of Hydra in the early 1960s.

It's narrated by Erica, a newly motherless teenager who has escaped the tyrannical gloom of her grief-stricken father to travel to Hydra to track down her mother's best friend, Charmian Clift, the real-life Australian feminist writer who lived on Hydra with her family for several increasingly chaotic years.

To Erica's unworldly eyes, the boozy freedom, sexual permissiveness and arty decadence of Clift's circle is utterly beguiling, and Sampson recreates it all in sensorial detail, overlaying descriptions of sea and heat, fruit and sunshine in ways that seem to replicate the effect of light through a stained glass window.

This is a troubling portrait of innocence lost, even if the group's destructive impact on their neglected children never comes sufficiently into view.