



Neurotic fantasy . . . at least until her writing has proved itself, the facts of Samson's life are likely to be given more space

PHOTOGRAPH: ROGER BAMBER

Godwin moved in. "I felt that he tried to put on Maschler's shoes before he had vacated them and it made me feel sick. He would say things like 'I've got Martin Amis's new novel, I'll tell you what I think,' and I would say, 'Don't you think it should be sent to Tom? He is Tom's author.'"

She continued to send things to Maschler and after a month, was fired. "Godwin sacked me with the words, 'You don't like me, I don't like you, I'm not going.' It was devastating."

Samson's relationship with the author Heathcote Williams broke up less than a year later, leaving her with a baby son, Charlie, and no obvious source of income. Armed with a few book reviews she had done for the *Observer*, Samson reluctantly entered the market as a freelance journalist.

"I felt like I was in the wrong job. I wasn't very good at it, and I never felt happy when I handed a piece in. The imperative for me was to keep my head above water financially, so I was completely non-selective in what I wrote. I had to do everything so fast that it became a nightmare."

She was offered a society column in the *Sunday Times*, a proto Palmer-Tomkinson effort which paid well but made her insides shrink. Physically, she looked the part. But she had a baby waiting for her at home and who *were* these people anyway and what was the point of publishing their pitiful anecdotes?

"Never, ever again. That was incredibly grim — running up to people who you don't know and asking silly questions. Of everything I have ever done, that column was the pits."

Ed Victor thought so too, and wrote to tell her so. Get out of journalism, he urged, write a novel. Samson knew Victor from her publishing days and for years resisted his pestering, frightened she would fail him.

"I had this awful feeling that once someone had turned me down that would be it. I didn't want my vision of the future obliterated." She was saved by a national short story competition which one of her friends urged her to enter. Tentatively, she sent off *Wasted Time*, the story which opens *Lying In Bed* with a portrait of a little girl's affection for the three kids next door: Charles (1822-1828), Lucy (1823-1831) and baby Henry, (1819-1823), who reside in the Victorian graveyard beside her house. "She wished that she could move Henry closer to Charles and Lucy. She knew that he was lonely and wanted someone to play with."

The story was highly praised and gave her the impetus to send the rest off to Victor. He was mildly exasperated. Short stories? Who reads short stories? "He said, 'You're mad, please don't do this to me, don't make me sell a book of short stories.' But I'm far too neurotic to put a novel straight out. If it was completely pilloried I don't think I'd ever write another word."

She has finished a novel too now, rushing it out on 12 hours a day before the reviews for *Lying* (which she predicted would be horrible) could throw her off course. But she isn't a misery guts: Samson's glum predictions are delivered with the amused, self-mockery of the "I'm a nutter but at least I know it" variety. "It would be nice if I could get past the insecurity," she says, smiling, "but I've read enough interviews with writers who have self-doubt to know that it doesn't go away. Maybe that's what makes you try so hard."

A short story of success

Real Lives

Her life was the stuff of page-turning fiction: a mother who fought in the Red Army, a pop star husband and a high-flying publishing job. But could she write? **Emma Brockes** finds out

It is rare for a literary agent to ring an unpublished writer and beg them for a manuscript. It is mildly fantastic when that agent is Ed Victor, the literary tough guy who hustles on behalf of Jack Higgins, Douglas Adams and Erica Yong.

But Polly Samson is no minor talent. Her book of short stories, *Lying In Bed*, justifies Victor's faith in her with the sort of prose that makes you miss your bus stop; prose which, after you've looked at her photo and read about her life, you rather hoped would be crap.

At least until her writing has proved itself, the facts of Samson's life are likely to be given more space. You want politics? Her half-Chinese mother fought for Chairman Mao in the Red Army and her father was diplomatic correspondent of the *Morning Star*. Grit? She and her son lived hand to mouth in London after she was fired from a top publishing job at Jonathan Cape and had to start again as a journalist. Glamour? She was saved from financial and nervous ruin when she married a rock star, Pink Floyd's David Gilmour. The two now live with their children in a country mansion where even the dog has a high profile (Tilly-the-rescue-mutt was spotted during Samson's recent

Vogue shoot and will be starring in the next *Habitat* catalogue).

Samson sounds like a composite of every marketing manager's pet dream, a sort of scary virtual client cooked up to make you feel bad about your life. Meeting her is a relief. She looks younger than 36, has a loosely slung pony-tail, a sloppy jumper and a fear of running over the dog when she backs out of the drive. "Have you eaten? Would you like some toast?" she asks, reminding you that you liked the stories because they made you go, oh, that's just like me.

Talking to Samson is the same. Nothing endears like common neuroses, and Samson is reassuringly crap about a lot of things: "I tend to look on the black side," she says, perching on the edge of the chair to avoid disturbing the cat. "When Ed Victor liked the stories I began to think that perhaps he was deluded in some way. It drives David absolutely mad."

David is in the kitchen, chopping things. The house is busy, nappies stacked on the window ledge, kids' paintings on the walls, surfaces crazy-paved with knick-knacks. When the photographer asks Samson to perch on the radiator, she scans the jumble of books on the shelf behind. "Let me just check there's nothing embarrassing in shot, like *How To Survive Your*

Nervous Breakdown," she says with a fling-back laugh.

Ten years ago it wouldn't have been so funny. Then, Samson was working as publicity director at Jonathan Cape and on the cusp of being fired. She had entered the firm as a secretary and, in spite of the mild, self-jeopardising tactics she employed to excuse potential failure, had been promoted.

"I couldn't type and nobody gave me a test. There were all these efficient people going tappety-tap all day around me, so I did the same, only I was typing gobbledegook. I had to stay in the office until nine every night to get the work done." The managing director mistook her long hours for ambition and she rocketed up the company.

But in 1989, her boss, Tom Maschler, went to the South of France to recuperate from illness, and David

'It would be nice if I could get past the insecurity,' she says, smiling