



Singer Leonard Cohen (holding the guitar) with friends in Hydra, Greece, October 1960

Love island

Holidaymakers might not get to Greece this summer, but Polly Samson’s evocation of bohemian life on Hydra in the ’60s is almost the next best thing, says **Judi Herman**

Although Polly Samson’s novel features an undeniably hot, 20-something Leonard Cohen among her deliciously hedonistic collection of visitors to the Greek island of Hydra circa 1960, *Theatre for Dreamers* is not a feverish imagining of the relationship between Cohen and his muse Marianne Ihlen. Nor is it simply an homage to, or hagiography of, the lionised poet, singer and songwriter.

Leonard and Marianne are just part of the colourful, eccentric entourage revolving around the charismatic Australian couple and feuding writers Charmian Clift and George Johnston. Pretty well all of Samson’s dramatis personae are based on real-life characters, and Clift and Johnston were the epicentre of the bohemian cluster of artists and musicians living the dream in Hydra’s idyllic setting. Cohen, then a 25-year-old with one collection of poetry under his belt, arrived on the island in 1960, hoping to finish his first novel.

Setting the main thrust of the action in 1960, “in reality almost half a decade before the sixties began”, lets Samson set up what life was like for the “post-war, pre-hippy generation of teens and twenties that began the experiment”. That makes her contextualisation of the times and evocation of place so vivid and satisfying. From the get go, this reader was beguiled by Samson’s glorious descriptions of the island landscapes and her sensual

evocations of the pleasure-seeking visitors. Not that it’s all lotus-eating and all-day ouzo- and retsina-fuelled bliss. There’s a daily reality check as electricity is turned off each evening and in the necessity of hauling water up the island’s steep alleyways in order to flush waste and wash, never mind to provide drinking water.

The narrator, Erica, through whose lens the reader sees the island’s transient human fauna, may be invented, but she is a fully fleshed, three-dimensional woman. She first appears in 2016, revisiting the scene of her teenage idyll 55 years on. She is deeply affected by the news of Cohen’s death and the sight of his erstwhile island villa turned into a shrine by mourners.

The story loops back in time to recount how 18-year-old Erica has fled across Europe with her boyfriend Jimmy, her brother Bobby and his two nubile female admirers. She is seeking refuge from her repressive father following the death of her mother, Connie, and is welcomed to Hydra by Clift, her mother’s old friend. The group is drawn into Clift’s partying circle and Erica inevitably finds herself helping the embattled Clift with her three young children and chaotic housekeeping.

The scene is set for the arrival of Cohen:

“It’s not all lotus-eating and retsina-fuelled idylls: the electricity stops every evening and there’s no running water”

if you are a Cohen fan, you will appreciate the subtle way Samson introduces the poet into Clift’s crowd, and to his muse Marianne. You will be as charmed as Marianne is by his tender attitude to her infant son, in marked contrast with the neglectful father and husband that is her adulterous partner Axel Jensen. You will revel in the sensuality of Cohen’s 26th birthday beach party – and you will take on board the reminder that to be a

woman in the 1960s usually meant being the homemaker responsible for “kinder and kuche”. Erica, still more homemaker than writer, observes, not dispassionately, the affairs, fights and petty jealousies that

disfigure the island paradise.

Many chapters stand up as exquisite short stories in their own right, and Samson’s beautifully turned sentences and original images are constantly arresting: “I stand at the top of the steps and drink it all in. The hills flame with yellow flowers, the mountains are tipped with rose gold, every whitewashed wall shines crystalline with quartz. Leafy vines drape the white tunnel of steps.” Be prepared to be transported to

Hydra. ■



A Theatre for Dreamers by Polly Samson, Bloomsbury Circus, 2020, £11.99. **Judi Herman** is a BBC broadcaster and JR’s arts editor, blog writer and Outloud editor. See jewishrenaissance.org.uk