

# Polly go lightly

*Perfect Lives* is the title of Polly Samson's new book and her own seems pretty sorted too. But David Gilmour's wife has been on the dark side of the moon herself. David Jenkins finds the grit in the pearl

**I** don't want much,' says Polly Samson, with the hectic ebullience that characterises her conversation. 'I know it looks like I've got an awful lot, but I don't actually want, and never have wanted, very much.' It's a brave remark, that, from a woman with a rock star as a husband – David Gilmour of Pink Floyd – three houses in England, eight children (four her own, four step), a ravishing face once photographed for a feature on 50 British beauties and a beguiling new collection of short stories, *Perfect Lives* (Virago, £15.99), just out. But then, she says, she's only just found out what she's yearned for the 48 years of her life: to live by the sea.

And what a sea. Through the tall, tall windows of a first-floor room – its ceiling corniced, its lights shaded in elegant swirls of Fortuny – are the shimmering waves lapping on Hove beach. In one window is a black velvet chaise-longue; beneath another, a grand piano; on a wall, a luscious painting of an olive-skinned woman in front of a man with a guitar. At Polly's feet are two dogs, a Westie called Tiger and a lurcher called Doris; at their Sussex farm is 'another old girl – I'm a very doggy person.' To the right, she tells me, is a fantastic Italian restaurant, its ice-cream so delicious that queues snake up the block; further down the beach are the houses where David Williams, Zoe Ball and Heather Mills live, just in front of a fish-packing works; and, almost in front of the house the Gilmours moved into only three weeks earlier, is a municipal shelter that is, she says, her voice whooping with laughter, cottaging central!

That's a very Samson touch – to puncture the idyll with a sharp dose of reality; to remark, of 64-year-old David, that his 'friends are all dead; he seems to have my friends now, lots of whom are writers and journalists, actors and actresses'; to write, in *Perfect Lives*, of a man's oh-so-thoughtful dumping of a girl that 'his decency rankled, even now'; and to say that 'you get built up, and then you get knocked down, and terrible things happen to everyone'.

As they have to her. She may sit now, blue-jeaned, white-shirted, a Pipa Small necklace featuring a slice of grey diamond around her throat, her brown eyes alive with mischief. She may have published two other rapturously received books, *Lying in Bed* (2000) and *Out of the Picture* (2001); helped write the lyrics for *The Division Bell*, the 1994 Pink Floyd album that went straight to number one; stirred David into enormous charitable action – he gave, for instance, nearly £4 million to the housing charity Crisis; learned to play the piano from scratch and played behind David, live, on Jools Holland's show. And, for her children (Charlie, 21; Joe, 15; Gabriel, 13; and Romany, eight), she may have 'provided the childhood I would love to have had' – a childhood of ponies, camping holidays, meringues for tea and masses of involvement from her and David. >

## TEA WITH TATLER



From top, David Gilmour and Polly Samson, at the Royal Academy Summer Party; Polly, aged seven, on a camping holiday in France, 1969; shot by Bob Collier, London, 1991



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## TEA WITH TATLER

< But Polly was born with a terrible squint and known at school as Clarence the Cross-Eyed Lion. Her parents were 'preoccupied'; she 'had no friends'; she 'definitely felt unloved'; she has never called her father Daddy, always 'Lance'. (He had been diplomatic correspondent on the communist *Daily Worker*; her half-Chinese mother served as a major in Mao's Red Army, and the couple met in East Berlin. They are now, says Samson, 'the best grandparents' and she and Gilmour 'adore their company'.)

Polly escaped to London and, at 24, became publicity director at Jonathan Cape. Glamour incarnate, she carried off an equally glamorous romantic scalp: Heathcote Williams, the bohemian writer whose books, publicised by Polly, were bestsellers. She became pregnant, moved in with Williams and had their child, Charlie, now reading history at Cambridge – where, Samson says, 'he's gone a bit nancy-boy, because he's modelling as well.' And then, when Charlie was eight months old, Williams threw them out of his life. 'Heathcote just cuts off. And that was what was so hard.'

Her heart was broken. 'I was a wreck. I don't know how I coped – partly the kindness of strangers. I was sleeping with a small child on friends' sofas, and I got a call from [journalist] Cassandra Jardine, whom I didn't know. And she said, "I have a very large house, and you can come and stay, and I won't charge you any rent." I lived with her for a year. I'd sit and cry, and the only thing I could do was juggle. Heathcote had taught me to juggle, and it would sort of keep me sane. Then Cassandra said, "I think it's time you wrote an article; the *Telegraph* would like a piece on juggling." And that was how I got back to work.'

Gilmour came into her life. He proposed, often; she kept him waiting. Still unmarried, she went on tour with Pink Floyd in 1994. 'It was dreadful,' she says. 'Being resented – really, really resented – by the rest of the band because they'd toured with David four years before and they'd all had a wonderful time. And, suddenly, there he was with the inconvenient girlfriend. And he'd been the chief chimp: all the rock 'n' roll excess stemmed from him. And suddenly there was no excess. I became the focus of great irritation.' So imperious was Samson felt to be by others on the tour that she was known as Pol Pot. Not surprisingly, she demurs: 'I think I'm a pussycat.'

Things could only get better. She and David married, and the two boys followed, as did Polly's first two books. Then came the daughter, and the riding holidays, and the life on the farm, and the often-seen happy couple glimmering round London literary parties.

And now there's the new book, of 11 distinct stories, through which weave characters from other tales in the collection. 'I wasn't deliberately doing it. I found there would be a character I'd left in a story back there, and they presented themselves, kind of... "Me! Me! Me! My turn to be in the foreground!"'

The writing is so good that you can't believe she hasn't had a book published in nine years. 'Do you want to know why?' she asks, with a peal of self-flagellating laughter. 'Because I had a novel that died. It got to 40,000 words, and it was awful. It was a real shock, because the first two were so easy to write.' Even worse, she had created the ideal writing situation: 'I bought a little house in a medieval street, which felt so right. And then... the feeling of failure. And the shame!' She shifts on the dark-grey sofa. 'Then I took up the piano, and practised eight hours a day, instead of writing eight hours a day.'

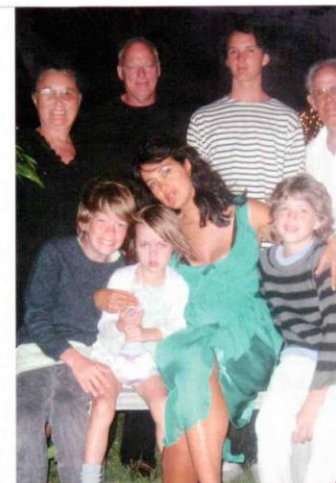
Finally, after she had 'sort of convinced myself I didn't want to write, and that I was very happy doing lyrics [for David's 2006 solo album, *On an Island*], learning the piano and being a really good mother', she was persuaded to see an analyst. Almost simultaneously, her friend Deborah Moggach gave her 'the number of an acupuncturist who had sorted

other friends out. So I started analysis and acupuncture the same week – and something unlocked something, within a week.' Another laugh. 'So now I'm stuck with doing both forever because I daren't give either up. And I'm completely pregnant with a new novel.'

She's also pregnant with the possibilities of Hove. She enthusiastically dragoons me and David (black T-shirt, black jeans) onto the street and into the ice-cream shop – small scoop of strawberry for her, larger scoop of blueberry for David. Then we go back to the spanking-new kitchen, with its polished silver-grey plasterwork, and to the rapture of unpacking a batch of huge Driza-Bone coats and Hunter boots in readiness for the wild seafront months ahead. (She also has 'drawers full of those half-worn-out-before-you've-worn-them, really thin Rick Owens T-shirts. And I love Manolos. And Levi's. And Lanvin, for something really special'.)

As she unpacks, David swiftly picks up an acoustic and plays intently – perhaps a new song is coming. In the alcove there's an exquisite new dining table, with a ping-pong net over it: 'We do an *awful* lot of things with the kids.' By the door is a wicker basket packed with apples from their farm. Polly hands me one for the journey back to London – it's delicious. Perfect lives, perfect lives. □

**'I was the inconvenient girlfriend... really, really resented by the rest of the band'**



From Polly's album: above, Polly, seated, second from right, with her family on New Year's Eve in St Lucia, 2008. Standing from left, Polly's mother, Esther Samson, her husband David Gilmour, her son Charlie Gilmour, her father Lance Samson. Seated from left, her children Joe, Romany and Gabriel Gilmour



Above, Polly with baby Charlie in Port Eliot, where she lived with Heathcote Williams, 1990. Below, Polly and David on their wedding day with, front row, Polly's son Charlie and, back row, David's children Clare, Matthew and Sara Gilmour, 1994

