The Kindness ****

by Polly Samson

(Bloomsbury, £14.99)

Polly Samson's exquisite novel opens with a hawk named Lucifer braced on the leather gauntlet of Julia who watches as the bird takes to the air. With Julia is Julian, who cycled in a mad panic to meet her after falling head over heels in love with the woman of his dreams. He is eight years younger and despite the fact that Julia is married to the aggressive, possessive Chris, he's in deep and so, it seems, is Julia.

Seven years on and everything has changed. Julian is floundering, depressed and intensely missing his daughter Mira "with a crown of daisies and sunshine in her hair" who is no longer part of his life. All photographs of her have been removed and all Julia's possessions are gone, too.

In mesmerising prose, Sampson follows the trajectory of their shared life, first through Julian's eyes and then from Julia's perspective. Julian's view is coloured by what's gone wrong, a bitter glaze over a relationship that glowed with passion. He recalls his joy at Julia's pregnancy, their lacklustre cheap room, the flat that they were able to afford when his cartoon series took off, a life of shared affection until Mira fell dangerously ill and Julia betrayed him.

Samson's portrayal of Julian is so adept that it's difficult not to feel hostile towards Julia but slowly, steadily she tips all you thought you knew about their shared story on its head. It's so subtly done and the revelations are so surprising that you're forced to reconsider the legacy of pain, grief and betrayal. Impressive.