

Mums under the microscope

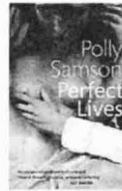
PERFECT LIVES ★★ ★★
by Polly Samson
Virago, £15.99

WHEN Polly Samson chose the title for her new book she probably intended it to be taken with a hefty pinch of salt.

A multitude of characters inhabit her latest collection of short stories and their lives are anything but perfect. There are no great tragedies here, no life-changing crises but an air of dissatisfaction, malaise and disappointment permeates almost all of the tales.

Perfect Lives is an anthology of inter-connected stories featuring a disparate group of individuals. Some feature once while others return again and again, though viewed through different lenses.

The critically acclaimed author is a mother of four children and stepmother to an additional four and one cannot help but wonder therefore if



her brood provided some of the inspiration for her fiction, where secrets and complicated relationships abound.

Meet the piano tuner who could have been a concert pianist had stage fright and jealousy not got in the way. A thwarted wife becomes obsessed with her ex's new partner. The daughter of a Greenham Common protester recalls the day she narrowly escaped the clutches of "the man across the river". The character shows up repeatedly but is at her best in The Birthday Present when the bored housewife has a new diversion on which to heap all of her attention and affections.

Samson is especially good putting motherhood under the microscope as, despite what we might be led to believe, having children does not always come easily to women and this is an issue she explores with great insight and poignancy.

Tilda struggles to bond with new baby Danny in A Regular Cherub. Samson writes: "The day stretched before her: a day

with Danny was like being left in charge of a nuclear power plant, lonely and bleak, slightly nerve-racking, with lots of servicing and safety checks required."

Rose and her adult daughter are years down the line. Here the mother-child relationship is equally strained but with little prospect of ever improving. The irritable Rose criticises everything about her daughter, from her choice of vegetarian restaurant to her scruffy appearance.

Over an awkward meal Rose ponders: "Anyone would think she suffered from arrested development. Still dresses like a teenager. Such rags!"

As well as being an author Samson is also a lyricist which is very apparent in her beautiful, poetic writing. The links between these varied stories, which range from the bleak to the surreal, is not always immediately apparent so it will be a great pleasure to return for a second reading.

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