

Finely tuned pain

Shena Mackay finds privilege far from comfortable in Polly Samson's nuanced tales

Perfect Lives

by Polly Samson
225pp, Virago, £15.99

A volume of linked short stories is an attractive proposition for a writer - it has almost the gravitas of a novel but is not nearly so daunting to embark on in terms of structure and narrative flow. Polly Samson, the author of a novel as well as a previous collection of stories, uses the form to good effect in *Perfect Lives*, to examine the intertwined and sometimes tenuous relationships of her characters. Inevitably, some of the 11 stories here are much stronger than others, but together they add up to a cohesive entity.

The title is ironic, of course. To Richard, the failed pianist turned piano tuner, whose story "Bacarolle" is central to the collection, his clients the Idlewilds seem the ideal family. Not only do they live in a beautiful house in what he calls "the more decorative part" of an English seaside town - grand creamy architecture overlooking the shore - but they are the owners of a magnificent Bösendorfer concert piano. Celia Idlewild, the piano's owner, married to Graham, and mother of two teenage children, once thought that all her dreams had come true. But at her husband's 40th birthday party, on the beach outside their home, a chance remark forces her to reflect that "It takes just one thing: a freak in the weather; a tsunami snatching people up from the shore like jacks in its giant fist; a thermal maelstrom; the wrong sneeze; the bad geography where thermal plates rub themselves into a frenzy; or a Rachel at a party who can casually shatter a perfect life with a few words."

The 40 golden birthday candles were never lit. It was not quite a tsunami, but the party was ruined and Celia's heart broken. Later, it emerges that the Bösendorfer piano, made in Austria, once belonged to a high-rank-



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ing officer in the SS. Samson reveals the darkness and pain beneath the most polished surfaces and shows how history always permeates the present day. She sees the worm in the bud, the canker in the rose, the mildew on the vine, the genetic time-bomb primed to devastate.

Among her characters are concert pianists, artists, picture restorers, photographers; they are often privileged but they do not lead comfortable lives. There are grandparents who were murdered by the Nazis, missing fathers, mothers who don't love their children enough, tiresome husbands. Ambivalence and compromise are everywhere.

In "A Regular Cherub", Tilda, who has failed to bond with her baby son whom everybody else adores, views him through the distorted lenses of depression, noting cellulite where others see dimples, and even describing, to herself, his innocent actions as "lewd", a word that should never be used of a baby - unless it is a putto painted perhaps by Bronzino. Tilda only realises how precious he is when she almost loses him by her own carelessness. There is no such happy ending, though, for the tabby cat whose

kittens, but for Tilda's inertia, might have been saved from Tilda's mother-in-law, a farmer with the complacent cruelty of many country folk.

If that story generates unease, even more disturbing is "The Man Across the River", a chilling tale of a school-girl's terrifying pursuit by a strange man. When, as an adult, she learns that he has been caught, from his DNA, for the long-ago murder of another girl, she feels that "something small but monstrous was hatching in my memory" to grow "tentacles that slithered down the back of my neck".

Here, as throughout, humour lightens the gloom. There is a delightful and poignant account of growing up with a campaigning mother, going on demos and staying at Greenham Common. "Ivan Knows", about a little boy who is convinced that his babysitter (Celia Idlewild's daughter) is secretly a trapeze artist in the circus, is charming, with a seed of corruption in its ending. In "Leaving Hamburg", a renowned pianist visits the Jewish cemetery there, looking for her grandfather's grave, and finds it locked; "At Arka Pana" has her daughter travelling to Hungary, with the father she has just met, to visit the dying grandmother she has never known.

To describe a lyricist's prose as lyrical might be almost tautological - Samson is married to David Gilmour of Pink Floyd and has written the words for some of his songs - but where she excels is in her lush and sensuous descriptions, of objects of desire, such as a piano or a vintage Hermès Leica camera and its timeworn leather case; a wet garden on a sunny morning; the sumptuous colours of the textiles woven and dyed by Anna, whose beloved piano Richard comes to tune. Sadly, he concludes that it might have "graced the saloon of the Old Bull and Bush", but their meeting proves to be another link in the chain that binds together the disparate cast, which also dangles tauntingly the prospect of a perfect future for two of them, at least. If such a thing were possible.

Shena Mackay's *The Atmospheric Railway* is published by Cape. To order *Perfect Lives* for £12.79 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0330 333 6846 or go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop