

A Theatre for Dreamers by Polly Samson review — hanging out with the bohemians in the Mediterranean

Review by Patricia Nicol

The Greek island of Hydra is the star attraction of Polly Samson's transporting third novel. For her narrator, Erica, it is love at first sight. "The port of Hydra sweeps into view suddenly, dramatically, like a curtain has been raised between mountains ... a theatre for dreamers."

The novel begins in November 2016 when, after the news of Leonard Cohen's death, an English expatriate makes a pilgrimage to the house that was once home to the poet-singer and his muse Marianne.

Then the story spools back to 1960, and "amorphous", watchful Erica Hart, just 18, fleeing a grey London for this Aegean playground. A Post Office savings account, its £1,000 secretly accrued by her recently deceased mother, funds Erica's escape from a damaged, tyrannical father.

Erica's inspiration is a book sent to her mother from Greece by a bohemian former neighbour. *Peel Me a Lotus* by the Australian Charmian Clift describes her family's move to Hydra. After Erica's father angrily dismisses Clift and her husband, George Johnston, as "decadents . . . dragging their children from pillar to post . . . drinking all night with their lah-di-dah artists and poofter friends", Erica writes to Charmian asking her to rent her a house.

Samson's novel is an impressionistic, intoxicating rush of sensory experience, seen through the prism of the ingenue outsider Erica, reeling from the loss of her beloved mother even as she tries on adulthood for size. The glare of the Greek light, the exuberant flora amid the scrub, the uneasy relations between islander and interloper, are conveyed vividly. Samson pungently evokes the seasonal rhythms of island life and the sybarite schedules of Erica and her fellow travellers.

Prior acquaintance with Charmian, who Erica cleaves to as a mother figure, confers her a seat at the high table of the expatriate community; a chance to see up close that even paradise can pall when inspiration and funds run dry, and hangovers blind. In 1960 Erica is not just on the cusp of her womanhood, but of a sexual revolution. Samson's novel explores the limited horizons of even the most liberated-seeming women. Charmian may recommend Simone de Beauvoir, but putting dinner on the table comes first. The muse Marianne, "so happy to serve, so content to sit at the poet's feet", seems to strive to offer her husband, then lover, a domestic ideal.

It is clear from Samson's acknowledgments that this is a rigorously researched piece of period reconstruction. Sometimes less would have been more: so many figures are name-checked at portside rambles, rowdy taverna gatherings and decadent beach parties that you crave a head-clearing swim, or at least a who's who. Some overwrought sentences threaten to bring on heatstroke too.

Still, it could be months until readers experience such lush exoticism first-hand. Until then, this novel offers heady armchair escapism. Put on *So Long, Marianne*, dig out that ouzo from the back of the drinks cabinet and let Samson be your guide to Swinging Sixties Hydra.

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