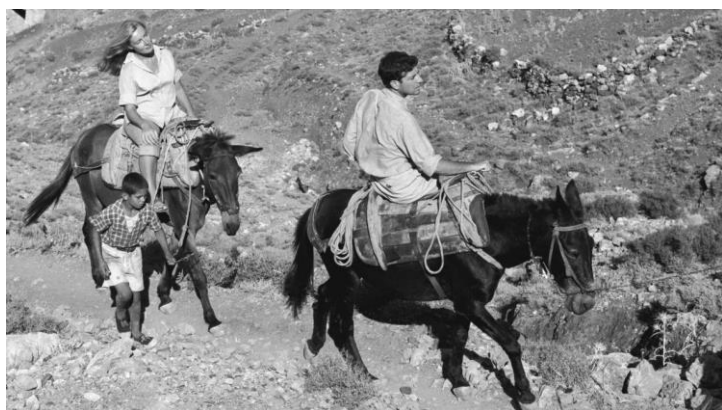


A Theatre for Dreamers by Polly Samson review — dancing to the end of love

Leonard Cohen and his sybaritic set on Hydra come to life, says Robbie Millen

[Robbie Millen](#)

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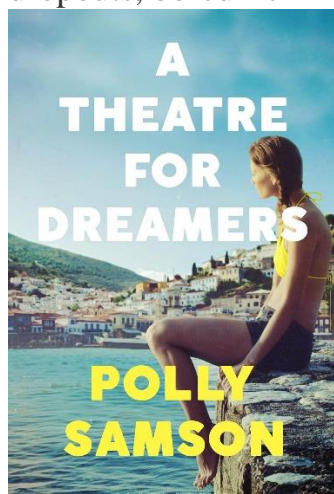


A pre-fame Leonard Cohen travels the Greek island of Hydra

TIME AND LIFE PICTURES

“Dearest Marianne, I’m just a little behind you, close enough to take your hand. This old body has given up, just as yours has too, and the eviction notice is on its way any day now.” Leonard Cohen wrote these touching words to his former lover Marianne Ihlen in July 2016, as she lay on her deathbed. He was true to what he said. He followed his old muse, the inspiration for *So Long, Marianne*, dying a few months later.

[Polly Samson](#)’s new novel, *A Theatre for Dreamers*, begins with Erica, a woman in her late seventies, tramping up the steps from Hydra’s port, reflecting on the Leonard she met, 56 years before, in 1960 when the Greek island was a home to a colony of writers, poets, painters, unwashed dropouts, bored rich kids and assorted creative riffraff.



Then we are catapulted back to 1960. Erica is 18. She is grieving for her dead mother, loathing her cantankerous, controlling father. This “rudderless, motherless girl” has been left a bequest, so with her beautiful boyfriend Jimmy (a would-be poet) and elder brother Bobby (a wannabe artist) they head off to find her mother’s old friend Charmian Clift who has left square, rain-doused Britain for the freedom and cheap living of Hydra.

It is a classic coming-of-age story. The wide-eyed, unsure and aimless Erica (“I seem to have hatched while no one was looking,” she says) learns about living and love from the island’s somewhat raddled colony of outsiders, most of whom are based on real people. Charmian and her choleric, tubercular husband George Johnston, “a bad-tempered booze artist”, were accomplished writers. In Hydra Charmian barely has a moment to write; George has succumbed to bitterness, although I found his Aussie crankiness about his fellow Hydriot visitors rather appealing — “monkey splat that passes for art . . . a right load of Pollocks and Twomblys”.

Leonard mainly stays off page. When he appears he is a sort of Hip Jesus, an aloof but charismatic peacemaker. Once he dispenses some high-blown wisdom about love he disappears in a puff of coolness. The focus instead is on Erica and her relationship with Charmian and later Marianne, wife of the Norwegian writer Axel Jensen.

If you are going to have a sentimental education, have it on Hydra. Samson is particularly good at evoking the sun-burnished charms of the place, its sea-spangled silver, mauve and tangerine as the sun sets. There are plenty of mouth-watering descriptions of food — olives stuffed with anchovies, fried squid — certainly enough to make it work as an upmarket beach read.

But it is not all golden-bummed Adonises and willowy striplings enjoying larksome jiggy. The novel has a lightly worn heft to it, as it probes freedom and creativity. All this bohemian bed-hopping, this Sixties experiment in free and easy living, so well brought to life here, comes with a price tag.

Rows, divorce, drunkenness, bitterness, rejection slips from publishers, unwanted children. It must have been fun on Hydra, but it’s not good for the soul to be surrounded by so many self-obsessed writers. As Erica notices, “the sight of so many writers is not an enticement to join their ranks”.

The novel muses on muses: is beautiful Marianne much more than a skivvy and bedmate, “a ministering angel” to a male ego? She created for Axel “a perfect universe for him to write the damn book without once having to worry about food or water or kerosene or typewriter ribbons”.

A character bitches that when Marianne leaves Axel (“a child-man” with the good looks “of a spoilt boy”) for Leonard the latter has got himself a “ready-made muse”. Charmian reflects that “it would be so much more restful, and much better for George, if I were to surrender to living more Greekly . . . like Marianne or any of these other lovely young women who are happy to serve their brilliant menfolk”. (It’s worth remembering that while Virginia Woolf said it was important for women to have a “room of one’s own”, she had Nellie to clean it.)

By the end of this enjoyable novel, which makes vivid an interesting moment and place, you discover people have paid a price — a heavy one — for that freedom in the sun.

***A Theatre for Dreamers* by Polly Samson, Bloomsbury, 350pp; £14.99, ebook £12.58**