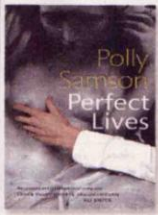


# Tales of broken promise

The author's eye for startling images makes these stories vivid, but what lies beneath the surface?



Perfect Lives  
by Polly Samson

Virago, £15.99 \* £14.39; 240pp

Natalie Young

**P**erfect Lives is a hubbub book. It arrives on the heels of a stylish collection called *Lying in Bed*, and a debut novel *Out of the Picture*, which earned Samson (who is married to David Gilmour of Pink Floyd) a place on the same shelf as Esther Freud and Barbara Trapido. Its cover is saturated in praise by famous writers who have stepped up with assertions that Samson's prose is "effortless", "unflinching", her stories "silken and intertwined", written, as they are, along the apertures of private lives.

Boys in awe, disenchanted lovers, concert pianists, and yearning, rebellious teenagers populate the affluent seaside town of Samson's survey. House fronts are stuccoed and gardens manicured; women are mostly serene in their feelings of emotional deprivation and envy, while cats are gorgeously combative, and wild women are only ever dark and called Morganna and everything else, back in the drawing room, is infused with the genteel sound of a piano pattering delicately after E.M. Forster's assertion that we try to connect.

The dress that Claudine packs to take with her father to Poland is the dress we have seen in the rapturous garden of the first story, which was worn by the mother of the chubby girl who babysits Ivan and inspires his dreams of the circus.

Samson is a gifted writer with an eye for startling images. The sea comes into its own here with description of lifeboats "bellying into the waves", and fishermen standing on the shore with lips as "shiny and wet as sea anemones", but the metaphor of return is drearily oppressive, as is the hint that the book is about lives in which the tides come and the tides go, and the human desire for perfection will never bring happiness because, as Leonard Cohen put it in an expression so hackneyed that it has become unbearable, the cracks are where the light gets in.

In *Barcolle* we are introduced to the



LIVES OF OTHERS Polly Samson's collection is set in a seaside town of manicured gardens and frustrated piano tuners

piano tuner who can't be happy because he isn't the concert pianist he was meant to be; his innate sense of perfection gave him paralysis in the form of stage fright. When he arrives at the house on Crescent Place, he stops for a moment to look at the sea and sees the Chopin piece "playing out in the peaks and troughs and in the trilling ripples of the waves" and soon the reader settles in to Richard's poignant way of thinking and begins to perceive the nuances of pain and regret in the corridors of these lives.

In *The Egg*, a mother ruminates on her marriage and the perfect world she has built around it, while her teenage children, Ed and Laura, gradually surface for break-

**Samson describes lifeboats 'bellying into the waves' and fishermen's lips, 'shiny as sea anemones'**

fast. The house is calm: "espresso coffee, ginger thins", rosewater flannels and a mother who "loosens her silky gown before sliding under the eiderdown and pressing her cheek against her husband's smooth brown back". Meanwhile, an egg lies cracked on the morning's post with a message for Father's Day from the daughter that the husband was never meant to have.

Edgar Allen Poe insisted that only when the desired effect or impression is clear in the writer's mind should he go on to invent incidents and arrange them in the order best calculated to establish this effect. Whatever the subject, the aim is to pull the reader along towards a "single moment when he finds impressed on his mind an effect identical to the one conceived by the writer". One overriding image — take the goat in Alice Munro's story *Runaway* — and the assurance that the writer has absolute control of the rest of the story so that every nuance, every word, is pointing in the same direction.

The problem with *The Egg* is an unsteady heap of images — the egg on the post, the hand on the perfect marble breast, the lips

on the figleaf — so that they begin to cancel each other out, leaving the reader devoid of the strength and economy of the bullet-like one. This lack of concision in the first story extends to the collection as a whole so that it feels increasingly like something that might have been a novel. Furthermore, the reappearance of characters is a mechanical disaster. As Richard, Laura, Anna and the bright yellow dress are dislodged from the framework of their original story they undermine the restraint and power of each so that the stories start to run and flap around like the sheets on Celia Idlewood's beach.

In addition to clarity and resonance, the stories in this collection lack the weight of real discovery beneath the knowledge that nothing is perfect, and happiness is unexpected, and perfection itself is transient. It feels as if these stories would prefer to be smoothed out into the wider, more discursive field of a novel, which would have allowed for the reappearance of character without threatening the form.

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