

A Theater for Dreamers

Polly Samson

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Polly Samson's escapist novel *A Theater for Dreamers* is set in 1960 on the quaint Greek island of Hydra—a haven detached from the rest of Europe, where artists roam free and unencumbered.

After eighteen-year-old Erica loses her mother, she finds an unopened package, sent to her mother, holding a copy of an old friend's new book. The book is set on a Greek island, and comes with an open invitation to come visit. Desperate to get away from her abusive father, Erica, her brother, and her boyfriend travel to Hydra for the summer.

On Hydra, Erica meets an elusive circle of talented artists and writers. She's an aspiring novelist herself, but shy. She becomes infatuated with the island and its eccentric denizens. Slipping into a fascinating clique, she observes unabashed drinking, drug-taking, and sex. But Hydra is perhaps too small to house so many stubborn creatives without conflict. Over time, the illusion of this utopian bohemia crumbles, and Erica's struggle to rise above midcentury gender roles does not end once she's out of her father's grasp.

As it turns out, the book's free-spirited artists are not figments of Samson's imagination. Rather, the book captures real people whose lives intertwined while they lived on Hydra, a young Leonard Cohen, an irreverent Axel Jensen, and the married collaborators Charmian Clift and George Johnston among them. The text is a glimpse at what the day-to-day lives of these luminaries might have been like.

The novel's meandering, dreamlike writing style is delightful, comparing a sunburnt woman to "strawberry ice cream, a morning calamine ghost," though some descriptions are belabored, dragging out the already slow-moving plot. Still, *A Theater for Dreamers* embodies a summer vacation, capturing the essence of Hydra in vibrant, saltwater-scented impressions.

AMANDA SILBERLING (May / June 2021)

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