

BOOK WARS

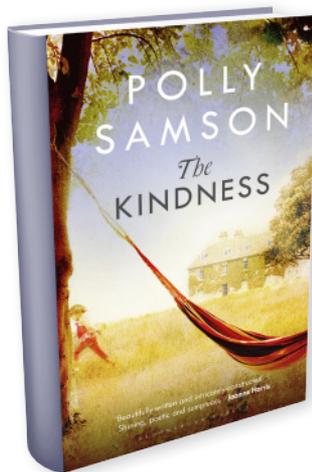
TWO NOVELS FIGHT
TO SEDUCE YOUTHE KINDNESS VS
HAUSFRAU*This week's novels explore marital infidelity, but which will keep you faithful?*THE
KINDNESS**Stylist
contributor
Laura Price
backs *The
Kindness*****by Polly Samson (£14.99,
Bloomsbury), out now**

I'm not a wife, but I admit there's something I find quite fascinating about adultery and forbidden passion – particularly that of the female kind. Having secretly (now not so secretly) enjoyed Martine McCutcheon's *The Mistress* a few years ago, I was eager to sink my teeth into these two tales of errant wives.

The Kindness is a love story told in reverse – we start with the protagonist, Julian, having lost the love of his life, Julia, and their daughter Mira, and we work backwards to find out what went wrong. Polly Samson expertly narrates the first half of the book from Julian's point of view, honing in on the damage done to a man who gave up everything for the woman he so deeply adored.

Although it starts off slowly, the suspense remains throughout the book and it is only at the end that we really delve into Julia's psyche and find out what she did, and why. Part of the book's beauty is in telling the deep consequences of betrayal as well as 'the kindness' – a deception made out of love that comes wrapped as a gift.

Hausfrau and *The Kindness* have plenty in common – both



leading women are selfish and sex-driven and ultimately rather unlikeable. But both Julia and *Hausfrau's* Anna also have redeeming factors, including the insecurities that partly explain their actions. Anna's honesty is particularly refreshing – she admits she loves one son more than the other and seldom feels guilty about cheating – but this also makes her hard to invest in as a character.

We can be quick to label men as the unfaithful sex, but these two novels show that women can be just as bad – and men can be just as damaged by the consequences. Both books are raw, gritty, dark and honest, telling the side of a story that is not often told, but the characters in *The Kindness* are simply more appealing, making it my Book Wars victor.

★★★★☆



HAUSFRAU

**Stylist
contributor
Georgia Posner
backs *Hausfrau*
by Jill Alexander
Essbaum****(£12.99, Mantle), out 26 March**

What is it about flawed characters that we love so much? *Hausfrau's* main protagonist, Anna, is icy, aloof and at times frustratingly timid. Why, then, is she so utterly compelling?

Hausfrau by Jill Alexander Essbaum depicts the story of Anna Benz, an expat living in Switzerland with her seemingly perfect family. On the surface, Anna lives a charmed life. But it quickly transpires that she feels detached and isolated from those around her, and as a result, seeks comfort in a series of

affairs. As she experiences exhilaration for the first time in her cautious life, she, and the reader, begin to question the definition of a perfect marriage.

We are granted access to Anna's private thoughts and actions, as her carefully constructed facade is broken away bit by bit. And there's no denying it, she isn't an easy character to like. She pushes away anyone who tries to befriend her, and admits that at times, she doesn't even like one of her children. But her searing honesty ensures the book is both gripping and wonderfully refreshing.

If *Hausfrau* is about the intimate thoughts of the person at the heart of a storm, Polly Samson's *The Kindness* depicts the events of the tempest itself. It opens with the covert meeting of a married woman, Julia, and her younger lover, Julian, before following the couple throughout their tumultuous relationship, jumping back and forth between their first encounter and its messy aftermath.

It's pacy and absorbing but lacks the intimacy of *Hausfrau*. Jill Alexander Essbaum allows you to enter Anna's mind. You begin to understand, and even condone, her behaviour, which centres around her personal insecurities. This allows for a fascinating glimpse into Anna's inner tumult and makes *Hausfrau* my winner.

★★★★☆

THE VERDICT: HAUSFRAU IS AN AFFAIR TO REMEMBER

Women are the not-so fairer sex in this week's novels, leaving untold destruction in their wake. Polly Samson traces the experience of the victim – the heartbroken Julian, while Jill Alexander Essbaum follows the troublemaker – icy, detached Anna. It's this access to the inner workings of someone willingly destroying their 'perfect' life that makes *Hausfrau* so fascinating – and this week's champion.

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