
'Compulsive, irresistible, remarkably vivid...'
TIME OUT
FIRE CHILD
SALLY EMERSON

SALLY EMERSON is the award-winning author of novels including *Heat*, *Separation* and *Second Sight* and an anthologist of poetry and prose. She lives in London. Her website is www.sallyemerson.com.

praise for
FIRE CHILD

'A taut, beautifully-constructed story moving simply but inexorably towards its cataclysmic ending'

Sunday Times

'A book that can be read as a comedy of modern manners, a love story or murder mystery – a rare achievement'

Literary Review

'With the narrative grip of Stephen King, Emerson's skill is in charging this novel with compulsiveness and foreboding'

Independent

'Told with power and skill. Sally Emerson has a talent for terror of the best kind, she understands obsession and hints chillingly at evil'

Daily Telegraph

‘Sally Emerson writes like a dangerous angel’

Douglas Adams

‘An ambitious exploration of morality in an irreligious society which explores evil in its modern forms. Adultery and sexual promiscuity dominate the narrative, which is set one autumn in contemporary London and told largely through the diaries of the two protagonists, the irresistibly sensual Tessa Armstrong and her diabolical arsonist love, Martin Sherman, who appears at first to be a contemporary Dr Faustus.

At 13, Tessa artfully combines the well-honed skills of an accomplished courtesan with contrived innocence. Unaffected by her lovers’ distress, she tosses them off like clothes. But when her father’s death, for which she feels responsible, pierces Tessa’s callous exterior, seduction stops being fun. Frightened by her own power over men, Tessa is suddenly troubled by a conscience she never realized she had.

Emerson has provided us with a thought-provoking, enigmatic novel, which raises questions that reach far beyond the confines of its plot’

Washington Post

‘The two protagonists are like sticks of dynamite blazing a trail which glimmers and crackles… The clever use of their

respective diaries, which span only a month and a day, effectively presents a wealth of detail, while moving the story swiftly forward'

Sunday Times

'A several-layered novel about a woman who from the age of 12 seduces and destroys men. A spare, subtle story of lust, love, violence and comedy'

Susan Crosland

'Sally Emerson's bonfire of a book demands to be read in one gulp, from its deadpan beginning to its demonic end.

You could perhaps call it a true romance, except that the lovers are a pyromaniac and a nymphomaniac and their affair, touching though it is, leaves several corpses in its wake.

The sexual politics of *Fire Child* run from the extravagant to the outrageous. This is a bravura performance'

Daily Mail

'Gripping... the character of Tessa is written with such spooky originality she fairly leaps off the page'

Kate Saunders

‘Disturbing and immensely readable’

Douglas Kennedy

‘Sally Emerson’s hero Martin and heroine Tessa were tailored for each other by some mischievous fury, and a more delightfully, evil, dangerous, sexy, amoral pair would be hard to find’

Mary Wesley

‘*Fire Child* pulsates with lust, grief and revenge. In spite of the contemporary setting, it has the immoderate quality of myth’

Victoria Glendinning

ALSO BY SALLY EMERSON

Heat

Separation

Second Sight

Listeners

Broken Bodies

FIRE CHILD

SALLY EMERSON



Quadrant Books

First published in Great Britain by Michael Joseph Ltd in 1987

Published by Quadrant Books

Copyright © Sally Emerson 2022

The right of Sally Emerson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publisher. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781861519870

Typesetting and eBook by Tetragon, London

This is a work of fiction. All characters are fictitious.
Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons,
living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

To my dear mother, Ceris Emerson

CONTENTS

PART I 3
1 MARTIN SHERMAN 5
2 TESSA ARMSTRONG 11
3 MARTIN SHERMAN 17
4 TESSA ARMSTRONG 35
5 MARTIN SHERMAN 45
6 TESSA ARMSTRONG 49
7 MARTIN SHERMAN 73
8 TESSA ARMSTRONG 85
9 MARTIN SHERMAN 101
10 TESSA ARMSTRONG 111
11 MARTIN SHERMAN 119
12 TESSA ARMSTRONG 139
PART II 145
13 147
14 151
15 163
PART III 179
16 TESSA ARMSTRONG 181
17 MARTIN SHERMAN 185
18 TESSA ARMSTRONG 189
19 MARTIN SHERMAN 190

20 TESSA ARMSTRONG 193
21 MARTIN SHERMAN 197
22 TESSA ARMSTRONG 205
23 MARTIN SHERMAN 215
24 TESSA ARMSTRONG 221
25 MARTIN SHERMAN 225
26 TESSA ARMSTRONG 231
27 MARTIN SHERMAN 235
28 TESSA ARMSTRONG 247
29 MARTIN SHERMAN 249
30 TESSA ARMSTRONG 251
31 MARTIN SHERMAN 253
32 TESSA ARMSTRONG 255
33 MARTIN SHERMAN 271
34 TESSA ARMSTRONG 277
35 MARTIN SHERMAN 285
36 TESSA ARMSTRONG 287
37 MARTIN SHERMAN 299
38 TESSA ARMSTRONG 301

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favour fire.

ROBERT FROST

PART I

1

MARTIN SHERMAN

Baalbec Road, Highbury, N5
Friday 1 September

I have gingery hair and no money, and bad habits like eating cold baked beans out of the tin. My small room is heated by a two-bar electric fire, which I keep on most of the time. My landlady thinks the world of me. This is actually not a great compliment as my landlady is stupid and has the hips of a hippopotamus. Her breasts are nearly as large. They sway from side to side. Sometimes when she wobbles down the stairs quickly I fear she's going to lose one. I am twenty years old. She's well over fifty.

She charges me less than the others.

The others are an odd lot too. There's Mr Phillips who looks like a praying mantis, and indeed has religious proclivities, or so my landlady tells me. He hardly ever speaks to anyone. He looms around the bathroom occasionally, but that appears to be very nearly his only social contact.

His room contains just a bed, a small kitchen table, one chair, one armchair, a few books and an old cooker. Mind you, my room is not much livelier.

A student couple live in a room on the top floor. Both have an imaginative array of acne. Their faces are never dull. Each new day brings a fresh spot, or a fresh development to an existing one. Jerry and Mary are always by each other's side. Sometimes I wonder if they are in fact joined: Siamese twins masquerading as a loving couple. They play pop music very loudly and seem particularly to enjoy scratched records.

My parents are very concerned about my early retirement to this quiet spot with its sloping floor, its dishcloth curtains, its faint smell of mummified rat. They expected a great deal more of me.

Some of the rooms in the house are so damp and dilapidated that they're uninhabitable. It's a shame really. The landlady lived here with her family as a child, and inherited it when her parents died. Now she lives in one ground-floor room with a kitchen extension which is about to collapse. Whenever it rains, the kitchen fittings become islands on a lake. Her husband died years ago and Mrs Monson (that's the old girl's name) simply cannot cope, in spite of her part-time job in a dress factory. The student couple are always late with their rent. She shakes her head sadly. They apologize in unison like Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Next week, the same thing happens.

Apparently they're both studying catering at a college in Finsbury. Mrs Monson seems faintly proud of having 'students' in her house. She's rather more doubtful about Mr Phillips, although he pays up promptly. His eyes swerve nervously when asked about his job, which I gather is something to do with debt collecting. Presumably he works behind a desk, perhaps just composing threatening letters. I can't imagine his being sent to rough anyone up. Unless he's paid just to appear at people's windows to frighten them with his gaunt face and huge bony hands.

Mrs Monson should sell Hope Villa (the name in the stained-glass panel above the door). It's a Victorian monster, situated near the station and overlooking Highbury Fields, a kind of village green, at the back. It's only a short distance from the centre of London.

All the other houses in the terrace have been renovated and moved into by nice, middle-class families, like so much of this area of north London. There is restoration going on in every street: old wallpaper ripped off, gas fires flung out, new cornices plastered in.

This place is too big for her to manage, and it would fetch a very good price.

The only problem is that it would be difficult to get rid of tenants like myself.

In the supermarket I just stamp and stack tins. It is not a high-powered job. The supermarket employees drift in and out just like the customers. Nobody seems to stay for

more than a few weeks. I've been hiding there for five years. My parents, who are middle class, disapprove of my job, saying that it's not worthwhile. Of course it's not worthwhile. However, it is peaceful and undemanding. I especially enjoy messing about with the tins, building them into tower blocks of squares or pyramids. And there is usually some absurd new product to amuse me – tinned curry, calorie-free jam, instant risotto.

The customers can be tiresome. Once a mild-looking middle-aged woman hit me over the head with her umbrella, then burst into tears; all because I'd said the milk was back down the aisle where she'd come from.

I spend much of my free time reading science fiction and books on astronomy. Although I like to think about the end of things – the universe disappearing, earth burning up, galaxies hurtling away from each other – such thoughts scare me. But I have felt safe in the supermarket and up in my overheated little room. The minutes and the hours have melted not disagreeably into days; I even sometimes thought that I might have got through my life without too much bother.

Occasionally, in the evenings, I found myself putting on a suit and going out and looking for her in clubs and bars. But I didn't really want to find her.

I wanted to dedicate myself to a solitary life of no achievement, like Mr Phillips, at fifty alone in one room with only a few books and an old cooker. I knew what the

alternative would be for me, or knew something of what it would be. And hiding from it seemed like the best bet.

But of course I have been lonely. Although I have had girlfriends none of them has been her. And although I had – until now – turned my back on ambition, I was still subject to occasional severe attacks of that particular brand of panic which I suspect makes people ambitious (chopping off enemies heads probably allayed the panic of Genghis Khan, writing plays no doubt helped Shakespeare's).

But then I had that dream. I dreamt I met the devil standing under a lamppost at night, in the rain. With raincoat collar turned up and trilby turned down, he looked like a crook from an old black-and-white movie. And yet, as is the way of dreams, I knew who he really was without his having to admit it.

Of course I have seen him before, in different forms. I have seen him as the charming Mephistopheles of *Faustus*. I have seen him swinging his umbrella in inventive old films. I have seen him by my bed at night as a child. I have seen him in the mirror.

Yet somehow I thought he wouldn't find me here, in my hideout. I just wanted to dawdle away my life. Do nothing. Contribute nothing. Leave it exactly as I found it. And then he comes with his smiles and his sneers.

2

TESSA ARMSTRONG

Northwood Road, Highbury, N5
Friday 1 September

I am very thin and find it hard to eat. Sometimes I think I'm starving myself to death because I'm tired of existing. I don't like myself. Ever since I killed my father I have lost hope. That was five years ago. I was just fifteen.

Before that my only problem in life was to decide whether to be an actress, a journalist like my father, or a chat show hostess. But at the same time, I realize now, I was cold. The drawer of this desk where I sit is full of love letters. I used to read them out to my girlfriends at school, in particular to my best friend Nicola, who was prettier than the other girls and wickeder. They were children, while Nicola and I were born old. She was the daughter of a politician. I haven't seen her for five years but we fell out long before that, one evening; an evening which caused quite a scandal.

I still like to read my old letters.

I think I was made with a very large Tessa-shaped hole in my mind and heart. I also think I was very brave to manage without you all those years. I loved you so instantly, and it's the same love I feel now, much stronger and deeper now, and growing so much all the time, but it's the same love. It's hard to see how it arrived like that, just suddenly and fully formed and without a moment's hesitation or doubt. You were the one, you are the one, you always will be the one. Darling, if I didn't know from experience that I will be more in love with you tomorrow than I am today and will be more in love with you still next week, I would say that I love you absolutely.

That one was written by a photographer I met in a park. He left the country when I grew bored and refused to see him. Even at the time my ability to inspire intense love rather surprised me. Especially as the love was always unreciprocated.

In those days, when my father was alive, we had a house in south London full of windows – bay windows, round windows, French windows – next door to three young boys and their parents. When the eldest boy Philip was thirteen, he started to want to swap stamps with me. Before that, I had been good only as a snowball target. I caught him staring at me intently as I examined his lovely Chinese stamps covered in dragons and sputniks on the floor of my bedroom. I suggested he give them all to me in exchange

for just one dull brown Norwegian stamp featuring a man with a small beard. He agreed, and for the first time I recognized my power. I remember the faint dark hairs above his lips and the furtive way he looked at me.

He never tried to touch me. Occasionally my arm would brush his, as if in error, and he would blush. He had big ears, short hair and an excellent stamp collection – until it was decimated by my unfair offers.

One day during an endless hot summer holiday I called round to swap stamps with Philip wearing a pretty backless dress, hoping to get better stamps that way. But Philip was out, playing cricket. His two brothers and mother were out too.

His handsome father, however, was in.

He had been mowing the lawn in his shorts, and had sweat on his face and a beer in his hand. He invited me in for a Coca-Cola.

'Your lawn looks very nice, Mr Brown,' I said as I stood at the window of the breakfast room.

I felt his hands on my bare arms.

'Yes it does, doesn't it?' he said in an ordinary voice as though nothing out of the ordinary were happening. His hands on my arms gave me an agreeable sensation, somewhere between a shiver and a burn. He kissed the hot nape of my neck.

'Where's my Coca-Cola, Mr Brown?' I asked softly.

He stopped kissing to reply: 'It's on the table behind

you. Do you want a glass or a straw?'

'No thank you very much. I'll drink it from the can... in a minute.'

His hands were round my waist – big, tough, man's hands. I liked the smell of his sweat. His hands moved upwards and pushed my breasts up. I closed my eyes in pleasure as Mr Brown kissed the back of my head and murmured into my hair. He turned me round and put his lips on mine.

It was not the first time I had been kissed but it was easily the best. The kisses of boys were inept: a slobbery blurring of lips.

Mr Brown gave complicated kisses. His tongue became one second like a small fish let loose in my mouth – it darted delightfully all over the place. The next second his tongue changed into a warm snake thrusting and pushing.

I stood limply and gave myself up to the pleasure.

His hand was undoing the buttons of my dress when the phone rang in the next room.

He started.

'Don't answer,' I said.

He looked down at me with a dazed expression, as though he didn't know who I was or how I'd got there.

'Don't answer it,' I repeated firmly.

His forehead puckered.

'Don't frown at me like that,' I said. 'You don't look quite so handsome when you frown.'

He continued to stare at me.

The phone seemed to be ringing louder and louder into the silence.

'Tessa, tell me. How old are you?'

'Nearly thirteen,' I replied, with a hint of pride. I was fed up with being twelve and being treated like a child.

He took a step back, then swung away, out of the room.

A minute or two later he returned. His eyes were piercing and blue and sort of scared.

'That was the boys saying they'll be back soon.'

I crossed my arms. 'I haven't had my Coca-Cola yet.'

He handed me the can. I watched him as I drank. A little dribbled down my chin. I wiped it off with the back of my hand.

His face was flushed.

He looked past me, through the window, at his garden with its tree house and its swings.

'They'll be back soon,' he repeated.

I put my arms around him, and looked up, big-eyed, sweet, very young.

His lips returned to mine.

We made love a few minutes later on the floor, before the boys returned home. It was my first time. I quite enjoyed it.

Afterwards, he dressed quickly and would not meet my eyes.

For the next few weekends I watched his house from

my parents' bedroom and when I was sure he was alone I'd call round asking for Philip. Always Philip's father offered me Coca-Cola. Always he tried not to make love to me. Always he did make love to me, and always he dressed quickly afterwards and would not meet my eyes.

During those weeks he lost a lot of weight and by the end was rather haggard and not as attractive as at first, so I became less interested.

I told him on the phone that I was going back to school and, what with homework and friends, would not have time to mess about with him any more. He went very quiet.

'Let's think of it as a holiday romance,' I said.

He wrote me letters and hung around to see me after school (I told everyone he was my uncle because by now he didn't look at all good).

One day the letters stopped and soon afterwards there was a 'For Sale' notice outside the Browns' house.

My father told me that poor Mr Brown had had some kind of breakdown and that he and his family were moving to the country once he was out of hospital.

It was the first time I had reason to be scared of myself.

Now I have less reason to be scared of myself. I could surely not be a threat to any man. My hair has gone grey. At twenty I have given up everything. I hardly eat. I don't read. I never go out, except to work. I have not bought any clothes for years, living in the shadows here.