

The forgotten genius of Barbara Comyns

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'Backlisted Essays' series: Lucy Scholes writes about her encounter with novels about ramshackle worlds and disappointed relationships, alongside the original podcast on 'The Vet's Daughter'

There's something about the work of Barbara Comyns that makes discovering her novels feel like stumbling across a well-kept secret. My introduction to Comyns was through her second novel, *Our Spoons Came From Woolworths*. I was living in Kentish Town in north London at the time, only ten minutes away from Haverstock Hill, the road on which the novel's twenty-one-year-old heroine Sophia Fairclough and her husband Charles set up home as a newly married couple in the 1930s.

I wasn't married, but I was the same age as Sophia and living with a partner for the first time that year, and although we weren't as poor as Sophia and Charles – poverty becomes a defining factor in their story – I was a struggling student in the first year of my PhD, feeling more than a little overwhelmed by the task ahead of me and wondering whether I'd made the right decision. I was reading the works of as many mid-century women writers as possible in order to firm up what was still at that stage a truly nebulous thesis proposal. Some of these writers – Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen and Rose Macaulay – remain fairly well read (in certain circles at least), but many of the others I encountered are all but forgotten; and while I greatly admire the former, it was often the works of the latter with which I felt the most affinity, Comyns included.

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Oddly enough though, rediscovering *Spoons* again in the past couple of years, more than a decade since I first read it, I was surprised at how different my memories of the book were, compared to the realities of the plot. It was much bleaker than I remembered. Sophia and Charles are both artists – she works in a commercial studio while he harbours more artistic aspirations. They marry against the wishes of each of their families, though it's Charles's that kick up most of the fuss; Sophia has been living alone in bed-sitting rooms since she was seventeen, 'a hard life and lonely sometimes, too,' she admits.

Their honeymoon period is brought to a swift, sharp end when Sophia finds herself pregnant, much to Charles's dismay and her own incredulity, since, despite the ring on her finger and her years of independence, she's still woefully naïve: 'I had a kind of idea if you controlled your mind and said "I won't have any babies" very hard, they most likely wouldn't come. I thought that was what was meant by birth-control.'

Her life soon becomes a daily grind of no money, a good-for-nothing husband, inevitable infidelity, botched abortions and dead babies. How I could have remembered this book as the slightly quirky tale of young bohemians, I have no idea. Yet despite all the hardships facing her, Sophia muddles through even when she's living off nothing but Oxo cubes. Later when I went on to read more of Comyns's novels, I realised that the same fortitude of spirit – some would call it youthful enthusiasm, a delusion I myself had perhaps been laboring under when I first read *Spoons* – characterises most of her heroines, not to mention Comyns herself, since so many of her works draw on experiences from her own life.

Comyns wrote eleven books. The first, *Sisters By a River*, was published in 1947, and the last, *The House of Dolls*, in 1989. One of them, *Out of the Red, Into the Blue* (1960) is more memoir than novel, an account of her and her second husband Richard Comyns Carr's relocation to Spain at the end of the fifties, though, as mentioned, there's more than an occasional blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction throughout her work.

'Anyway,' she thinks, 'where had love led me? To poverty and overwork, with only the old age pension to look forward to'

Sisters – initially written to entertain her own children – is a semi-fictional account of Comyns's childhood growing up in a large house on the banks of the River Avon in Warwickshire. Originally serialised in *Lilliput* magazine under the intriguing title 'The Novel Nobody Will Publish', it offers a potent glimpse of the ramshackle world in which Comyns – one of six children – was raised. The siblings in *Sisters* live in an ancient house that smells of 'wallnuts [sic] and church' with their parents, a violent father and a deaf, disinterested mother at continual war with each other. The children's wild, near feral existence is strangely macabre. They 'squashed the rabbits' attempting to ride them, rats fall down the chimney into the porridge pot bubbling away on the stove, and bloated pig carcasses and even on one occasion a 'very dead boy' are found bobbing in the river.

Spoons carries a disclaimer on its imprint page: 'The only things that are true in this story are the wedding and Chapters 10, 11 and 12 and the poverty'. The three chapters singled out are those that depict the labour and birth of Sophia's first child, Sandro, her experience of which is one of 'shame and pain' as she's shuttled from one 'torture chamber' to another by unkind nurses and disinterested doctors. Although the most sustained and explicit example, this isn't the only occasion Comyns writes about the harsh realities of the more unpleasant – not to mention often ignored – elements of being a woman. In *A Touch of Mistletoe* (1967) we're allowed a sneak peak into this hidden world. The young heroine Vicky gets a job as a salesgirl in a London jewellery shop for a period. While she and the other female employees sustain a certain level of decorum and reserve during trading hours, after they've kicked their high heels off and are changing the window displays after hours, a more forthright camaraderie is revealed that focuses around a particular sort of female conversation: 'a considerable amount of sexy talk used to go on, mostly old wives' tales about young brides who had had their nightgowns torn to shreds on their wedding night, childbirth and abortions, monster babies and the almost mystic horrors of the change of life.'

Rather aimless women buffeted by circumstance are Comyns's specialty, and first-person narration was her favoured means by which to tell her characters' stories

Like her predecessor Sophia in *Spoons*, Vicky is an unworldly innocent. The other women call her 'naïve' and take great glee in shocking her with all manner of 'fresh horrors' including gory tales of 'hermaphrodites, V.D. and falling wombs'. And like Sophia before her, Vicky is an artist, as is her first husband Gene. In many ways theirs is a much better match than poor Sophia and Charles, but Gene suffers a mental breakdown after which he ends up in a hospital where he tragically dies during the course of experimental 'insulin treatments'. Vicky's second marriage is equally ill-fated: Tony is a writer and book reviewer who falls prey to horrific bouts of alcoholism, and eventually abandons her for his mistress. However it's Vicky's third marriage that's the most tragic of them all, but not because she marries another no-hoper. Instead she settles for a boring but 'decent' golf-playing man; someone who saps her joie de vivre, but can provide for her in a way the 'fragile' husbands who came before never did. 'I knew I would be a fool to refuse him,' she admits, her heart sinking after he proposes. It's difficult

to find love after forty, two of her friends remind her, so, in what's one of the very bleakest moments of the book, she attempts to pull herself together and look on the bright side. 'Anyway,' she thinks, 'where had love led me? To poverty and overwork, with only the old age pension to look forward to.'

Rather aimless women buffeted by circumstance are Comyns's specialty, and first-person narration was her favoured means by which to tell her characters' stories. Only two of Comyns's novels are written in the more impersonal third person – *Who Was Changed* and *The House of Dolls* – the others all narrated by a young female (or young at least when her story begins) inevitably entangled in some kind of abusive relationship, lacking agency or direction of her own. Husbands and fathers are the most likely suspects. Marriage is the most obvious example of this bondage, as in *Spoons* and *Mistletoe*, while Alice Rowlands suffers at the hands of her sadistic father in *The Vet's Daughter*. But patriarchal power isn't the only source of suffering in Comyns's world; overbearing and cruel matriarchs can be just as dangerous. In both *Sisters* and *Who Was Changed*, a domineering grandmother is the cause of much hardship, while the heroine's aunt in *The Skin Chairs* (1962) takes on a similarly authoritarian role.

In the same way that actual family members often represent some kind of threat to Comyns's heroines, so too the domestic environment, rather than being a place of safety, is actually more often the site of danger, trauma and exploitation. 'Nothing could be worse than home,' thinks Alice in *The Vet's Daughter*, the novel that illustrates this most clearly. An Edwardian-set tale amongst the dirty backstreets of Battersea in south London, seventeen-year old Alice lives with her ill, downtrodden mother and her vicious, bullying father, a veterinary surgeon who shows no kindness towards either animals or humans. The Rowlands' house is a sort of Frankenstein's laboratory, dark rooms filled with tormented animals, and a continual stream of images of both dislocated body parts – rendered all the more disturbing due to Comyns's somewhat awkward syntax: the door to Alice's father's surgery, for example, is 'propped open by a horse's hoof without a horse joined to it' – and crippled beasts pepper the text. There's a mongoose in the kitchen; a parrot covered in bald patches, neurotically pulling out its own feathers while shrieking away in the lavatory; and one day someone brings in a 'mad cat in a sack' that had been 'partly cooked in the oven by mistake.'

This injection of elements of magical realism into her novels means that contemporary readers are wont to regard Comyns as something of a proto Angela Carter

Although there's some initial comedy of the grotesque, this eventually slips over into pure horror as we see humans treated worse than their furry friends. Doubled over with pain from the cancer eating away at her insides, Alice's mother climbs upstairs 'on all fours like an animal', and rather than nurse his wife in her dying days, her husband simply has enough one night and puts her down with as little fuss than if he was attending a cat or dog. After her mother's death, things go from bad to worse for Alice: a porter at a local hotel attempts to rape her, and after she departs London for a brief stint as a companion to the mother of Henry Peebles – a colleague of her father's – she's witness to the depressed woman's suicide.

There's plenty of the Victorian Gothic about *The Vet's Daughter*, the story seemingly owing a debt to *Jane Eyre* in the form of Mrs Peebles's creepy old house, from the old housekeeper who reminds Alice of a 'goblin' to the stories of the fire that cost one of the maids her life. What sets the novel apart, though, is the fact that Alice can levitate, something she discovers quite by chance following the attempted rape, future instances occurring at similarly traumatic moments in her life. What makes Comyns's use of the levitation most revelatory is the obvious metaphorical dimension: that of the psychological dissociation implicit in the act, a trait that will be theorised in the study of abuse victims

during the heyday of PTSD towards the end of the twentieth century, but certainly not something that was widely acknowledged or understood when Comyns was writing in the 1950s.

This injection of elements of magical realism into her novels means that contemporary readers are wont to regard Comyns as something of a proto Angela Carter. Indeed, if it wasn't for *The Vet's Daughter* having been published nearly thirty years earlier, Comyns's 1985 work *The Juniper Tree*, a story that re-imagines the plot of an old Brothers Grimm tale about an evil stepmother, could be regarded as little more than copycatting the more famous author. Bella Winter is a classic Comyns heroine: she hails from an unhappy home – in another archetypal Comynsian mix of tragedy and comedy, the source of her mother's hatred towards her daughter is both due to Bella's illegitimacy and the fact the pregnancy brought her mother's flourishing tennis career to an abrupt end – has a history of heartbreak – a lover who left her, followed by a drunken one-night stand with a young black man she never sees again, but who leaves her pregnant with her daughter Tommy – and she's also afflicted with a terrible scar across one side of her face (the result of a car accident she was involved in while her ex-lover was at the wheel) as an all too visible manifestation of the psychic trauma she's suffered.

This is something of a classic Gothic trope – internal suffering rendered in physical form on the exterior body. And Comyns's novels are fit to bursting with disfigured or limbless characters: the beeman's daughter with a 'humped back' and the aunt with 'funny feet' like 'seals' flappers' in *Sisters*; the 'hideous' old man whose face had been scarred by quicklime in his youth in *Who Was Changed*; 'little Clare, who had been born with a hand missing' and crazy old Mrs Alexander whose head was 'all scabs and holes' in *The Skin Chairs*.

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So too she fills her novels with a host of nightmarish scenarios and images. Nowhere more so than in *Who Was Changed* – the ghoulish tale of an outbreak of ergot poisoning that sends many of the inhabitants of a small village mad – which was considered so disturbing it was banned in Ireland under the Censorship of Publications Act. From the story of a woman who died from a nosebleed, through a host of grisly suicides to the unforgettable image of a burned man, 'something crawling on the ground ... something human' tinged with the 'sickening smell of burnt flesh and smouldering cloth still burning.' Although contextualised by the ergot poisoning, Comyns's transformation of a sleepy village from rural idyll into blood-soaked horror show is strikingly disconcerting. Similarly, images in *The Vet's Daughter* and *The Skin Chairs* are so affecting because of their supposed benign settings: the unassuming London suburbs; and middle class, middle England. In many ways *The Skin Chairs* is the book that plays with the Gothic and the grotesque in the most interesting way, not least because of the titular 'skin chairs' themselves: six 'massive oak chairs' covered with human skin that are the spoils of war of the General who owns them. 'With a feeling of awe I gazed at the chairs thinking of the poor skinless bodies buried somewhere in Africa,' thinks the novel's heroine, ten-year-old Frances. 'Did their souls even come to see what had happened to their skins or had they forgotten all about them? How had the General brought the skins back? And did the workmen who covered the chairs know what gruesome work they were doing?'

Though Frances's own mother is a rare example of a kind and genuinely nurturing maternal figure, the novel is marked by monstrous adults. There's the beautiful but inattentive young mother Vanda who neglects to feed her baby daughter and then kicks her down the stairs in a moment of supreme carelessness. The creepy holey-headed Mrs Alexander who performs autopsies on dead animals and

insists on poor Frances spending innumerable hours in her company. And, of course, the General himself with his bloodthirsty past, a man physically transformed into something grisly when on a later visit to see the chairs, Frances and her sister Esmé discover him lying on the floor, 'one eye was open and the other shut. The open eye saw us and he sort of gurgled and slightly moved one freckled old hand.' Scared it's a ploy to "frighten" them, the children flee the scene, only to discover later that the old man had actually suffered a stroke and, no help having been forthcoming, had 'died worse than a dog.' Not for the first time in Comyns's work, humans fare worse than animals.

Given that she plundered so much of her lived experience for her fiction, it's intriguing to learn she struggled to write a straightforward autobiography

All the same, *The Skin Chairs* draws to one of the more hopeful conclusions. By the end of the novel the family's poverty is a thing of the past, Frances's widowed mother having happily remarried a wealthy businessman and she and her children now want for nothing. Comyns isn't as kind to all her heroines, not least poor Alice Rowlands who's trampled to death on Clapham Common by a mob gathered there to watch her levitate – a money-making scheme dreamt up by her greedy, unscrupulous father. Dressed up in 'a long white dress ... and white silk stockings that were soft against my legs,' she's depicted as something between blushing bride and virgin sacrifice, not that it matters either way since the resultant message is the same: being a woman in Comyns's world is fraught with danger at every turn.

Comyns's protagonists' lack of agency means it's impossible to hold them up as models of feminism; when Bella gives up her freedom in order to marry in *The Juniper Tree* she's well aware she's not exactly furthering the cause: 'Bernard, how Women's Lib would hate me if they knew how I feel about you,' she declares in a rare moment of political context. But the novels themselves are a clear form of protest, whether this was a conscious move on Comyns's part or not. Reading her diaries, I found little to suggest she was much of a feminist, though she does mention Margaret Thatcher's election as leader of the Conservative Party in February 1975, after which she writes: 'I hope we shall have a woman Prime Minister soon.'

I made this discovery last November when I spent a week in an old redbrick Victorian farmhouse in the Shropshire countryside – the home of Comyns's granddaughter, Nuria, and her husband – reading the diaries Comyns kept from the mid-sixties. Luckily I'd packed some serious knitwear as although the house was very picturesque, there turned out to be no central heating. My room was colder than most since it sat directly above the old slaughterhouse. How deliciously and distinctly Comynsian, I thought with a chill I couldn't entirely attribute to the weather. A feeling that only snowballed as I entered the living room to discover a genuine tendril of leaved ivy growing through the wallpaper. It wasn't quite the hall of the General's house in *The Skin Chairs*, the floor of which has patches of grass 'growing between the paving stones,' but it made me feel like I had entered the slightly surreal world of Comyns's fiction. To top it all off there were enough animals around the place to start a small zoo: a happy band of dogs, one of which was a Chihuahua with a penchant for drinking tea out of a cup and saucer like the most civilized of humans; more cats than my hosts could count, all of which seemed to permanently live in the kitchen, curled up asleep tucked in nooks and crannies; beloved horses in the fields beyond the garden; and a squawking peacock stalking the yard outside the kitchen. My time with the family was, Nuria informed me with a wry smile, a pretty good insight into the world Comyns herself had inhabited, and that which fed her work.

Comyns wasn't a well-educated woman, having had little in the line of formal schooling, though she did attend art school, first in Stratford-upon-Avon and then at the Heatherly School in London. Nuria

explained that her grandmother had always thought of herself more of an artist than a writer, and as if to prove this point there were a selection of Comyns's works hanging on the walls of the farmhouse: she favoured bright colours and bold images with not too much detail, her compositions tending towards the surreal. 'Painted the picture of an owl and bat and big pink splodge,' reads her diary entry for 1 March 1965. And yes, hanging on the wall above the staircase was a picture I couldn't have described better myself.

Like anyone embarking on research, I'd be lying if I say I hadn't hoped the diaries would reveal a wonderfully complex and three-dimensional portrait of a woman about whom so little is known. *The Vet's Daughter* contains a short introduction written by Comyns herself in 1980 that's the most definitive source of biographical information available, but it's disappointingly brief. Indeed, in a diary entry written on Saturday 3 November 1979 she writes: 'Tried to write my life story for Virago but couldn't concentrate.' Whether she's referring to an early draft of the piece that eventually appeared in print, or initial plans for something akin to an actual memoir that never came to fruition, I can't be sure. Given that she plundered so much of her lived experience for her fiction, it's intriguing to learn she struggled to write a straightforward autobiography. Though I'm wondering if Renata Adler's explanation of the paradoxical impossibility of actually making reality read as reality goes some way in accounting for this apparent disconnect. 'Sometimes in the fiction there is stuff that is more literally true than what I could do in reporting about the same situation,' Adler explains. 'It happened to me again and again in writing fiction, that I would be telling a story ... and the whole reason for my telling it came at the end, right, and then I'd be writing it literally as it happened, as I understood it as it happened, as well as I could, and suddenly I would think, look, this has to be cut off here, before the good old point, because it looks too like satire that's gone too far.' In what way too far, the interviewer asks: too far because it's too real? Too far because it's too harsh? 'No, too far because reality is so much more extreme sometimes than what one can actually write without putting people completely off.'

In many ways, Comyns's biography does read like the stuff of fiction. She married her first husband the artist John Pemberton when she was twenty-four years old in 1931, and during the course of the marriage she gave birth to two children – Julian and Caroline – but the relationship broke down sometime around 1935. She met her next husband, the civil servant Richard Comyns Carr, in 1944. Chronology of events in the years between is a little sketchy; she moved, with her children, to Herefordshire at some point where she worked as a cook in a country house, and it was during this period that she wrote the first version of *Sisters*.

She spent some of the war in London though; living with a black marketer named Arthur Price, a relationship and associated experiences that are loosely fictionalised in *Mr Fox*. She and Comyns Carr married in 1945, and it was while on honeymoon in Snowdonia in Wales, where, incidentally, the couple were staying in the MI6 double agent Kim Philby's cottage, that the initial idea for *The Vet's Daughter* came to her. (Alice's mother hails from rural Wales in the novel, and apparently in the first draft it was her story rather than her daughter's that took precedence.) Then, towards the end of the fifties, the Comyns Carrs emigrated to Spain, a move inspired just as much by their rather precarious economic circumstances after Richard lost his job, as a desire for excitement and a change of scenery. They spent nearly twenty years abroad before they returned to London in 1974, moving first to Twickenham and then Richmond. Comyns outlived her husband, and eventually passed away in Shropshire in 1992 at the age of eighty-five.

Unfortunately there don't seem to be any diaries from the early years of her life. Not that they would have given much away since those available tended towards the anecdotal rather than anything deeply

illuminating. 'I never mention the important things that happen, just odd rubbish and the weather,' she writes one December, pondering whether there's any point of what's clearly become more of a habit than any attempt at true journaling. Her entries are often rather desolate, and most of the time she doesn't come across as especially happy. Disappointment with her writing features heavily – although she can't know that the best books of her career are behind her, she's clearly struggling – including the weeks she spends waiting to hear whether Graham Greene, who had praised her 'strange offbeat talent' in *The Vet's Daughter*, liked what was to be her final book, *The House of Dolls*. He didn't, I'm afraid to report, and I have to admit I agree with him, since compared to the strange surreal brilliance of her previous novels it's a rather unremarkable work. The news leaves Comyns decidedly deflated though. 'Nothing to look forward to now,' she writes.

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Reading both the diaries and her memoir, it becomes increasingly clear that like her heroines Comyns struggled to make ends meet throughout her life. Much of her life was spent living a precarious existence on the sidelines rather than inhabiting the mainstream. This, though, is what sets her apart from her peers and makes her fiction so remarkable. She's such a fascinating oddity to be reading today: a writerly style that eschews artifice in favour of economical, pinpoint observations; an attitude towards women and the inequalities inherent in marriage, motherhood and domesticity, and the particular ways in which poverty affects them, that is simultaneously of its time and also strikingly familiar; and her startling use of devices that, were they to be employed today, would doubtlessly be described as postmodern. It's like she's a writer lost in time. With every new reissue of her novels, the ranks of dedicated Comyns fans swell and strengthen, proof that it's little more than a stroke of bad luck that so much of her work languishes for the most part unknown. She's an author of rare genius, ripe for rediscovery, her novels not so much a gentle breath of fresh air, but rather a chilling, bracing blast.

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Lucy Scholes writes about books, film and art. She is a contributing editor at Bookanista, and she writes for the Financial Times, the Observer, BBC Culture, the New York Times Book Review, and Literary Hub, amongst others. She also runs Bitch Lit, a monthly feminist book group, at Waterstones Gower Street.

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