



OUR SPOONS CAME FROM WOOLWORTHS

by Barbara Comyns

Introduction by Emily Gould

\$14.95 US • Paperback • 224 pages

TR: 978-1-59017-896-6 • EL: 978-1-59017-897-3

“I defy anyone to read the opening pages and not to be drawn in, as I was. . . Quite simply, Comyns writes like no one else.”

—Maggie O’Farrell

ABOUT THIS BOOK

“I told Helen my story and she went home and cried.” So begins *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*. But Barbara Comyns’s beguiling novel is far from tragic, despite the harrowing ordeals its heroine endures.

Sophia is twenty-one and naïve when she marries fellow artist Charles. She seems hardly fonder of her husband than she is of her pet newt; she can’t keep house (everything she cooks tastes of soap); and she mistakes morning sickness for the aftereffects of a bad batch of strawberries. England is in the middle of the Great Depression, and the money Sophia makes from the occasional modeling gig doesn’t make up for her husband’s indifference to paying the rent. Predictably, the marriage falters; not so predictably, Sophia’s artlessness will be the very thing that turns her life around.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the introduction to *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*, Emily Gould writes, “[T]he destabilizing inconsistency of tone that [Comyns] cultivates. . . is entirely deliberate” (viii). Where did you find instances of this in the novel, and to what effect?

2. The book’s title comes from the first chapter of the book, in which Sophia, the narrator, describes the objects in the flat she shares with her soon-to-be husband, Charles. “We had a proper tea-set from Waring and Gillow, and a lot of blue plates from Woolworths; our cooking things came from there, too. I had hoped they would give us a set of real silver teaspoons when we bought the wedding-ring, but the jeweler we went to wouldn’t, so our spoons came from Woolworths, too.” What does this detail tell you about Sophia, and why do you think Barbara Comyns used it as the title of the book?

3. Aunt Emma is a minor character in the book, but someone who Sophia and Charles “both admired. . . immensely” (5). Sophia says of Emma, “She. . . was altogether very intellectual and interested in women’s rights, but she disliked children, babies in particular. . .” (6). Why do you think Comyns included Emma in the novel? What do you make of Sophia’s admiration for Emma?

Barbara Comyns (1909–1992) was born in Bidford-on-Avon, in the English county of Warwickshire.

Comyns wrote her first book, *Sisters by the River* (1947), while living in the country to escape the Blitz, which is also when she made an initial sketch for *The Vet’s Daughter* (first published in 1959, and available in the NYRB Classics series). This, however, she put aside to complete *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* (1950), about her first marriage, and *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* (1955).

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4. At the beginning of Chapter Nine, Sophia describes an imaginary dialogue between two characters, and concludes, “That is the kind of stuff that appears in real people’s books. I know this will never be a real book that business men in trains will read. . .” (41) In what way does this scene add to your understanding of Comyn’s intent as an author?
5. Did you find *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* to be a subversive novel, and in what ways?
6. How are the scenes about women’s health, childbirth, and abortion still relevant today?
7. What were your first impressions of Peregrine, and how did they change by the end of the novel, when Sophia visits him at home and meets his wife?
8. When Sophia goes to work for Mr. Redhead, she “adopts” a small fox, which she refers to as “Foxy.” What role does Foxy play as both a character and a symbol in the novel?
9. *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* begins “I told Helen my story and she went home and cried.” At the book’s conclusion, Sophia sits in her garden with Helen and begins to tell her story. Why do you think Comyns framed the narrative in this way?
10. Do you consider the book’s conclusion a “happy ending”? If so, how does Comyns avoid writing a “happy ending” that is too saccharine, or unbelievable?