



Barbara Comyns (1909–1992) was born in the English county of Warwickshire and attended art school in London. She wrote her first book, a series of sketches based on her childhood titled *Sisters by a River*, in 1947, while living in the country to escape the Blitz. She also made an initial sketch for *The Vet’s Daughter* during this time, but set it aside to complete *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* (NYRB Classics) and *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*. Among Comyns’s other books are the novels *The Skin Chairs* and *Out of the Red into the Blue*, and a work of nonfiction about Spain, where she lived for eighteen years.

Sadie Stein is a writer and critic living in New York. She is a contributing editor to *The Paris Review*.

THE JUNIPER TREE

by Barbara Comyns

Introduction by Sadie Stein

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“A treasure from the 1980s... *The Juniper Tree* picks up the Grimm notion that an excess of maternal happiness can prove fatal... Comyns’s prose is vivid and charmingly hurried... The Grimm story is about evil, revenge, and justice—an eye for an eye—but *The Juniper Tree* is about accidents, damage, and repair.”

—Christine Smallwood, *Harper’s*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Bella Winter has hit a low. Homeless and jobless, she is the mother of a toddler by a man whose name she didn’t quite catch, and her once pretty face is disfigured by the scar she acquired in a car accident. Friendless and without family, she’s recently disentangled herself from a selfish and indifferent boyfriend and a cruel and indifferent mother. But she shares a quality common to Barbara Comyns’s other heroines: a bracingly unsentimental ability to carry on. Before too long, Bella has found not only a job but a vocation; not only a place to live but a home and a makeshift family. As Comyns’s novel progresses, the story echoes and inverts the Brothers Grimm’s macabre tale *The Juniper Tree*. Will Bella’s hard-won restoration to life and love come at the cost of the happiness of others?

FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the introduction, Sadie Stein describes the style of *The Juniper Tree* as “a kind of unsentimental magical realism, in which the odd rich detail shines out of an otherwise abstract field.” How would you describe the style of the novel? Which descriptive details in the book stand out to you?
2. On the opening page of *The Juniper Tree*, we find a rhyme from the Grimm’s fairy tale “The Juniper Tree”:

My mother she killed me
 My father he ate me
 My sister, little Marlinchen,
 Gathered together my bones,
 Tied them in a silken handkerchief,
 Laid them beneath the juniper tree,
 Kywitt, Kywitt, what a beautiful bird I am

Why do you think Comyns decided to include this rhyme at the beginning of her book? What is the relationship between the Grimm’s rhyme and Comyns’s novel?

3. What was your first impression of Gertrude and Bernard Forbes and how did your impression of them evolve over the course of the book?

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4. What is the significance of the scar on Bella's cheek?
5. What descriptions give the book a fairytale atmosphere?
6. Describe Bella's relationship with her daughter, Tommy/Marlinchen, and Bella's relationship with her own mother. How does motherhood work as a theme in *The Juniper Tree*?
7. Bella's daughter is referred to as "Tommy" at Bella's house and "Marlinchen" at the Forbes's home—what do you think is the significance of her name changing between the two houses?
8. What role does the antique store play in Bella's life, and how did you feel when she was faced with the choice of giving the job up to live with Bernard?
9. How is domestic life described in the book? Did you find that Comyns's descriptions of domestic life contributed to the mood of the book overall?
10. Two characters—Gertrude and Johnny—die in the book. How do these deaths shape the mood of the narrative?
11. Did you feel that the story had a moral, and if so, what is it?

FOR FURTHER READING

The Vet's Daughter

Barbara Comyns (introduction by Kathryn Davis)
ISBN 9781590170298

Our Spoons Came from Woolworths

Barbara Comyns (introduction by Emily Gould)
ISBN 9781590178966

A View of the Harbour

Elizabeth Taylor (introduction by Roxana Robinson)
ISBN 9781590178485

Great Granny Webster

Caroline Blackwood (introduction by Honor Moore)
ISBN 9781590170076

The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne

Brian Moore (afterword by Mary Gordon)
ISBN 9781590173497

The Pumpkin Eater

Penelope Mortimer (introduction by Daphne Merkin)
ISBN 9781590173824