

## FOREWORD

The novels of Barbara Comyns are strange and unsettling, and her career was unorthodox. She was never a mainstream writer, though her fiction has in recent years been described as a foreshadowing of the Magic Realism that became fashionable in England in the 1970s and 1980s, long after she first began to publish. *The Juniper Tree*, which appeared in 1985, is one of her most successful, confident and curious productions. It has the clear pure narrative quality of a fable, but also shows a humanity and maturity not always evident in her earlier stories. It is an outstanding achievement by a woman in her late seventies, written after a mysterious silence of eighteen years.

Barbara Comyns Carr, née Bayley, (1907–1992) took her pen-name from her second husband, a Foreign Office employee whom she married in 1945. Her first publication was a memoir, *Sisters by a River* (1947), which was garnered from a collection of sketches and essays written in somewhat faux-naïf Daisy Ashford style spelling and describes her highly eccentric childhood in a decaying old house in rural Warwickshire with a deaf mother, a demanding grandmother, and a hard-drinking father. She was the fourth of six children in a downwardly mobile middle class family, and the misfortunes of the poverty-stricken genteel, taking refuge in artistic Bohemia and in unskilled modelling or housekeeping jobs, provided one of her staple themes. Her first novel, *Our Spoons Came From Woolworths* (1950), a lively account of her reckless and feckless first marriage to an unsuccessful

artist, was followed by several more titles, including her best-known, *The Vet's Daughter* (1959), which features a scene of levitation.

Her second husband's close association with Kim Philby, exposed as one of the Cambridge spies in the early sixties, led to the couple's flight to Spain where they lived in semi-exile for nearly twenty years. It was on their return to England, and in particular to a home in Richmond, that Comyns was moved to write *The Juniper Tree*, inspired in part by a very strong sense of the spirit of place, and perhaps encouraged by the reprinting of some of her early work by Virago Press. This powerful contemporary fable is based on a well known German fairy story collected by the brothers Grimm, which she herself described as 'too macabre for adult reading'. It has all the power of the original, in which a young wife longs for a child 'as red as blood and as white as snow' but dies at his birth, leaving him to fall to the care of a stepmother who prefers, in the time-honoured way, the interests of her own daughter Marlene. She murders the boy and feeds his flesh in a stew to his unwitting father, but little Marlene his half-sister gathers his bones and buries them under the juniper tree, wrapped in a silken scarf. The secret is betrayed by a bird which flies out of the tree, singing

*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.*

The Freudian content of this tale is striking, and wicked stepmothers (this one is killed by a falling millstone) are an

essential part of the stuff of fairy stories, as Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1978) and Marina Warner's 1994 study *From the Beast to the Blonde* so clearly illustrated.

What is truly remarkable about Comyns's version is her insight into the stepmother's role, and her compassionate twentieth century version of the deadly millstone. (This is in stark contrast to the cool heartlessness of the tone and plots of some of her early novels.) The stepmother narrator of this version, who lives to tell her own tale, is a rounded character, a single mother surviving in the multicultural London of the 1980s, maternal, affectionate, hard-working and enterprising, whose life connects by chance with the beautiful, generous, calm, blonde German wife Gertrude and her English husband Bernard. Comyns's adaptation of the Grimm plot is both ingenious and creative, and her portrayal of London as she rediscovered it on her return from her long absence in Spain has a clear-eyed freshness and sharpness. She sees with the eyes of wonder, but not with the eyes of innocence.

She uses many of the types and tropes of the traditional fairy tale - Bella the scarred heroine; the hunchback godmother; the black coal merchant stepfather; the wicked fairy, the carved bear; the thieving magpie; the drops of scarlet blood on snow - but she weaves them into a realistic narrative that gives the reader a vivid sense of daily London life. She knows the world of bedsitters and playgrounds, of parks and junk shops and antique shops, of drunken parties in Bayswater and stately dinners in Richmond, of Spanish au pair girls and Italian waiters and illegal immigrants. And, in her seventies, she writes with authenticity about this richly peopled landscape, and writes from the point of view of a much younger woman, confronted with the choices and decisions of a single mother who (like the wicked stepmother in the Grimms' tale) is programmed to prefer the rights of her own child. The complexities of her fatherless dark child Marline's relationship with the red-and-

white son of Gertrude and Bernard are skilfully suggested, and although the narrative has a clear line, it does not simplify. It resonates and expands.

Comyns's use of colour in her prose is striking, and no doubt reflects an aspect of her early training at the Heatherley School of Fine Art in London and subsequent years spent scratching a living by drawing cartoons for an animation studio and working as an artist's model. She was attracted to colour, to exotic fabrics and designs, to the periwinkles and blue berries in Gertrude's Richmond garden, to the simple images of a child's picture book, to a startling scarlet refrigerator. Yet there is nothing childlike in this story of two small children and their mothers. This is a sophisticated account of adult emotions, recorded without sentimentality, and without any conventional preconceptions of how life ought to be lived. It has its shadows as well as its brightness. It is a strange tale that rings strangely true, with an unexpected ending that startles, surprises, and in its way forgives.

*Margaret Drabble*