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This is the story of the Willoweed family and the English village in which they live. It begins mid-flood, ducks swimming in the drawing-room windows, “quacking their approval” as they sail around the room. “What about my rose beds?” demands Grandmother Willoweed. Her son shouts down her ear-trumpet that the garden is submerged, dead animals everywhere, she will be lucky to get a bunch. Then the miller drowns himself . . . then the butcher slits his throat . . . and a series of gruesome deaths plagues the villagers. The newspaper asks, “Who will be smitten by this fatal madness next?” Through it all, Comyns’ unique voice weaves a text as wonderful as it is horrible, as beautiful as it is cruel. Originally published in England in 1954, this “overlooked small masterpiece” is a twisted, tragicomic gem.

Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead Details

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From Reader Review Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead for online ebook

Lisa says

A perfect little Hallowe'en treat for gruesome children. It reminded me strangely of The Man Who Loved Children; twisted family dynamics are pitched at you and the author moves on, leaving a sickening afterimage to burn into your eyeballs. Dark genius at work in fairy tale land.

Can you say *macabre*?

Kathryn says

Listing this book on my humor and literary-horror shelves makes me all warm and fuzzy inside. Yet as a word of warning, the humor is very dark, satirical at times, with the entire book meeting in the middle between humor and horror.

This is one of my flirt-finds. There is a young woman who works in the local used book store and I have been lucky enough on more than one occasion to approach the register when she is busy flirting with a customer. She tells me to pay some miniscule amount and to not worry about what the sticker on the book actually says, or tax. Really, she means "Leave. Now. I'm lining up dinner plans".

Anyways, on this particular day, I went in with a gift certificate to add to my store credit and was determined to find something worth reading. The books people in my town read tend to have one of only a handful of names on the cover-King/Koontz/Clancy/Steele/Roberts. I could not find anything and decided to grab this book on a whim since I liked the title, but I was unsure of the cost and did not want to pay much. I ended up paying 50 cents. Another reason to feel warm and fuzzy inside.

Having never heard of the author, I let the book sit. I picked it up when I needed something unknown and now I feel so very lucky. My edition begins with a lengthy introduction by Ursula Holden. I read only the first few paragraphs of the introduction before beginning the book as I felt too much was being revealed for something I hoped to be surprised by. After finishing the book, I was curious about the author. Barbara Comyns was a writer/artist who led an interesting life with many ups and downs. Graham Greene was a fan and the latest edition of this book included an introduction written by Brian Evenson, both authors being two of my favorites. If I had not already finished, you can bet I would have started immediately.

This book is a mix of compassion and small-town honesty, focused on an absurd, cruel, kind, and very human family. The town first suffers through a flood and then other worse things begin to happen, things that made me gasp in surprise. There were some terribly disturbing scenes. The Grandmother was a terrifying character, or maybe it was more that I could feel the terror of her family whenever she appeared.

So, this is highly recommended and I'm off to find more by the author.

karen says

this book was a perfect book to read directly after *prayer for the dying*. when i was reading the o'nan, i kept thinking "this is like an even sadder *winesburg, ohio*", even though that was a poor comparison. but i still feel that way. this one is closer to what an even more depressing winesburg would be, because it is also funny, which is an element not to be found in the o'nan.

but funny in the way that, as you are laughing, you are horrified.

there are several elements that, bizarrely, occur in both the o'nan and the comyns, causing me to have to pause and think, "okay, did the horse hit his head on the tree in this one or the other??" etc. (it was in the o'nan, in case you are consumed with curiosity):

- 1) disease tearing through a town killing nearly everybody compounded by an aggressive act of nature (in this case, a flood precedes, but does not cause, the disease)
- 2) many animal deaths/many human deaths
- 3)(view spoiler)

but there are vast chasms of difference between the two books.

this is not a quietly haunting piece meditating on man's place in God's world, this third-person piece is closer in tone to a book narrated by a child or forrest gump or a god. there is an emotional disconnect between what is happening and the overall tone; it is entirely dispassionate. even the humor is less written than perceived; extracted from the reader themselves. and it is always undercut by the gross, the tainted - ants in the sandwiches, slugs in the water-pump, the corpses of peacocks floating by, the beds full of blood, the slit throat like a smile...but i am not imagining the humor, for all of this.

what's the plot, karen? well, that's the tricky part, innit? this book reads like someone spun a reel of film and picked two arbitrary points at which to cut, and called it a day. the opening scene comes directly after a flood, where the willoweed family and their help are sorting out the living from the dead animals, and setting the house in order. it ends after something major happens that is very briefly touched upon, and then all is summed-up in an 80's movie-style "this person did this and this person became that and this person went "weeee weee weee" all the way home."

in between, all is madness. literally - madness. disease takes over the inhabitants of the town, as one after the other succumbs, goes mad, and frequently kills themselves. did i mention this was funny? it is a sour kind of funny - not madcap or dry or satirical, but genuinely funny, when it's not all madness and death. trust me.

the last chapter seems compressed somehow, which is the only reason this didn't get five stars. i was left a little bewildered at the end of it all. after so much detail to this point, to be left hurriedly, without enough closure or answers... i felt cheapened.

now is the time in the review when we laboriously type out passages from the book. they are at the end so you can read them or not - no matter. i am just offering them here because they give examples of what i have been ineffectually trying to describe.

this is my favorite passage in the book:

when the girls tired of rowing they tied to boat up under a willow tree. it seemed as if they were in a green tent. they sat there for a little time; but the bottom of the boat smelt of fish, so they climbed out and lay on the river bank in the sun. the river breeze rustled the rushes and made a whispering sound. after a time emma opened the picnic basket and they ate honey sandwiches with ants on them and drank the queer tea that always comes from a thermos. when there was no more picnic fare left they lay in the sun again in a straight line, and became very warm and watched dragon-flies. some were light blue, small and elegant; others were a shining green; and there were enormous stripey ones that took large bites out of the water-lily leaves.

as dennis lay in the sun, he thought how pleasant it was having a picnic with emma in charge. he remembered other afternoons when his father had forced him to bathe from the boat, and, when he had clutched at the sides with terrified hands, his father had bashed his fingers with a paddle and laughed and yelled at his struggles in the water. when at last he was allowed to climb back, his teeth used to chatter. that seemed to make his father laugh even more. he used to lie at the bottom of the boat while his father laughed and emma dried him, grumbling at their father as she rubbed him with a towel. so far this year there had not been any of those dreadful bathes.

i was going to type out another passage, until i realized it would amount to typing out nearly two full pages, and you people don't want to read that much, do you? you have holiday cookies to bake me and all. you may as well just go read the book. just know that pages 1-4 (and it is a small book, not typical trade-paper dimensions, so that is indeed roughly 2 pages) are amaaaazing. they are a perfect example of what i was babbling on about before - with the tone and the darkness and the sad fates of the animals.

and later, this:

"he smelt so dreadful, and he crawled..."

shivers

Jonathan says

Pretty much perfect.

Jeff Jackson says

This novel probably sounds more macabre than it reads: It opens with a disastrous flood and takes place in a small English village beset by a mysterious epidemic of suicides. But once you get past the gruesome knife wounds and floating animal corpses, it's a surprisingly wry and often gentle book. The story circles around several children growing up in a beatific countryside and the turns their lives take during these strange events. Comyns strikes a tone that's between all the expected registers - normalizing the surreal imagery and making the closely observed psychology seem deeply odd. Black humor mixes fluidly with sincere heartache. Imagine a more pastorate Edward Gorey, perhaps. The narrative is leisurely but compact, and more deftly constructed than it might initially seem. As a physical object, this edition is beautifully made.

❀?RoryReads?❀ says

Other reviewers have compared Barbara Comyns to Shirley Jackson, and they're right to do so. Both authors have a way of describing awful situations and people with detached, pinpoint precision.

The Willoweed family, living in a small English village in 1911, ruled by the tyrannical and cruel Grandmother Willoweed, are beset first by flood and then by an epidemic. Who is changed, who is dead and who escapes has nothing to do with who is good and who is bad. I guess the theme of this story is that it rains on the just and the unjust.

The writing is fantastic; I felt off balance and uncomfortable much of the time, which I suppose was the writers intention. This is well worth reading, if only for the style in which the tale is told.

Stacy says

Barbara Comyns is absolutely one of my new favorite writers. Her work is so strange, so precise, so ever-so-slightly gruesome. Reading Comyns is a kind of submersion; like lifting your feet from the lake bottom and drifting; like closing your eyes against a grey sky as the water rises around you, lifting your hair, filling your ears, slipping overhead until everything around you is blurred and green. A world recognizable--but barely.

Nate D says

First caught my eye via the incredible title, before I realized I'd been meaning to read this for a while. And it's great, the best thing I've read this month, probably. Comyns shares certain peculiarities of tone, observation, and conviction, perhaps, with interwar favorites Jane Bowles and Denton Welch, but seems initially to be taking things into much more phantasmagorical territory. Initially we have the macabre pastoral British landscape, a flood, unexplained public suicides, creeping madness, but everything gives way unexpectedly to realism and sorrow (somehow maintaining, throughout its instances of gruesomeness and loss, a kind of innocence. Strange and surprising and wonderful.

Edward says

Introduction

--Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead

Mariel says

As soon as the funeral was over, and before the mourners had hardly left, the uninvited surged into the churchyard to watch the gravedigger fill the grave with clods of clay so recently removed and to examine the dying wreaths. They were accompanied by many dogs.

Grandmother Willoweed commissions a boat to transport her to the funeral of the summer. The rest are a bunch of Johnny come latelys. The doctor's wife finally kicked it after extending her wifely presence beyond the sick room. I'm sure Grandmother Willoweed had a reasonable explanation to believe this funeral prospect so enticing that had nothing at all to do with grief or compassion. That she won't cross lands not owned to her is one of Grandmother Willoweed's eccentricities. If it is for the sake of being a mad cow I can hardly guess (if we are taking bets I am placing my Star Wars collection on this option now). It must come natural to her to read like a check list of stupid mad bitch things to do. The ship will be black and it will carry her body smothered in funeral appropriate attire. She's likened to a crow more often than a bird pie is consumed in a Roald Dahl children's book. I imagined her as one of the Baba Yaga veined witches in a Miyazaki anime. Braids flying and imposing gleeful fistful expressions. She's such a bitch. She probably could fly if she terrorized you long enough into being afraid of her. She's outside your window. Or is that a tree branch in the right conditions against a shade. I wondered how her servant Ives didn't kick her into one of the grave plots, or a garden plot, long before the story reached its conclusion. The grandchildren hate her and her son is a pompous fool. If I had to live with her I would gladly consume a small loaf of (free!) poisoned rye bread from the local cuckolded baker.

The best bit about this book is that it doesn't have a wink winky nudge nudgey bone in its body. I've had it on my real life bookshelf for a while and put off the real life reading of it in case it was too jaunty. I'm not in the mood for jaunty or jocular or jock strap or jesting or joking or jeering. I don't want to be poked with how funny or eccentric stuff is. I THINK this has a reputation as a long distance cousin (or is it an in-law) of Cold Comfort Farm. I haven't read that book in hundreds of years so I couldn't tell you. I do remember a stuffy English miss who could function as an easily identifiable marker on the eye chart amongst the chickens with the heads cut off running around on the cuckoo farm. I probably shouldn't have mentioned that. I was doing better with Miyazaki. I liked the laid back manner of real life workings in the village so there didn't have to be some straight guy working off the comedians effect going on.

Ebin Willoweed "coaches" his children under the thumb of his grandmother. When he can he hides in his room and half ass ponders his life. The cute little nurse he had to let go because she expected to be treated to cigarettes. Did his wife find a black man in their white town to father their last child behind his back? How much his children seem to hate him. The life he lived when he had a wife and fathered his brood of children, when he was a journalist, slid back into his childhood. He slumps down easily without his spine. Enough of Ebin. I felt sympathy with his eldest daughter Emma when she thought that her wimpy father made her hate men. He doesn't mean to do them ill but what comfort is that when you're stuck. Comyns was good at conveying this half assed thought patterns of a faded out ghost of a big man. People feel sorry for him. They feel more tired of him. His mother plots out her bitchiness and yet she also exists on a slime crawling thought pattern that it felt every day life world turning. I liked that. You wouldn't need a rooster in their village. Grandmother Willoweed bullied Ives? Time to get up.

So the bestest parts of the book for me were the every day terrorizing of stupid bitches and useless fathers. Mysterious illnesses and mouth frothing insanity and people dropping off like flies and cats and dogs wasn't as much to me. If you like the sort of thing of people killing cats by falling on top of them, maybe. I can't muster up the kind of enthusiasm needed to say that anything is a ripping good yarn. I liked that it wasn't. The baker never meant to kill anyone. I liked his newly made assistant Toby of the unavoidably scarred face.

He used to live there and people didn't stare at him too much, accepted him. He moved to the city where people stared a lot. He felt the cold. When he drifted back home again no one remembered him. It was colder for the difference. Maybe he was looking for people to stare too much. I had the feeling that if you left this village maybe you'd notice the dead dogs phenomena more than if you were in it when it happened. Or maybe it is just me and I am more resistant to humor than I even feared. I hardly laugh any more. It's a relief when I'm not expected to. I was more interested in the servant girl who gets pregnant because she finds it so hard to be good. If the married guy just doesn't laugh when she tells him. Her sister with her simple fantasy of walking on the arm of that boring guy. If that's all you're going to ask for and then you gotta get sick from eating stupid free bread. I didn't laugh but I didn't fake not look away. Emma loved her little brother because he didn't find it so easy to be happy. The rest didn't belong to her. That's rough. The freak accidentalness of how they die doesn't seem to matter then. They had to grow up with the delight in the misery of others. Feckin' Grandmother Willoweed. What a bitch.

Elizabeth says

This book belongs on the shelf next to "Let's Murder Uncle," "I Capture the Castle," and of course, that famous gem of odd goings on in the British countryside, "Cold Comfort Farm."

However, be aware that Comyns tragicomic little gem is dipped in a blacker hue than any of the previously mentioned books. Originally banned in Ireland for its singularly bleak vision, "Who was Changed..." begins with a flood, goes on to a mysterious string of violent deaths brought on by good intentions (possibly the only good intentions in the book), and ends with a funeral.

The novel's three children are wonderfully and sympathetically limned as they try to make their way through a crazy adult world. The evil grandmother and inept father are both hilarious and monstrous. And one can only pity the feckless servants.

Written in a clear, unflinching prose that's peculiarly beautiful, "Who was changed and who was dead" is an uncomfortable vision of country life that makes me very glad to live in a city.

Josh says

(3.5) An extremely entertaining, weird and funny story about a family that doesn't get along, a tragedy within that same community and what happens in the aftermath of said tragedy. Comyns was a writer with a hugely imaginative mind and this kept me reading without boredom.

Generally, when there is a lot of death and grief I feel a loneliness, a darkness inside. She finds a way to make the act of dying not sad, but a part of the actual entertainment.

Recommended for people who don't take life seriously and want a quick read to pep them up, even through what can usually be perceived as *depressing*.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I recently purchased books from the Dorothy Project, and one of the books was this one. I had never heard of the author or the book. So there it was, on my shelf, and then a character in another book I just finished, *Swimming Lessons* by Claire Fuller, mentions the book in passing. It was a clear sign that I should read this next.

This is a weird and disturbing book (in a good way) - the town seems to take floods, epidemics, and dead animals (and people) in stride. The baker's wife is running around with other men in town, and she isn't the only one. At the same time, the typical pastoral small-town English novel is going on, so the contrast is entertaining.

I find it amusing that this novel was banned in Ireland (it came out in 1954.) I'd really like to know which part disturbed them the most!

Justin Tate says

A quirky, forgotten classic brought back to print and deservedly so. I'm particularly impressed by Comyns' ability to float among POVs as often as the wind changes without driving me crazy. As they say in the introduction, this novel shouldn't work. Developing an entire town of characters in 200 pages seems like an insurmountably difficult task - and yet here it is.

The plot is infused with tragedy and dark humor and sometimes it's hard to discern which tone she's going for. In any case, there are few to no laugh-out-loud moments. Even still it's hard not to read without a wry grin as the number of dead bodies steadily rise. I don't know that I would categorize it as a must-read, but I do adore its uniqueness.

Sean says

Barbara Comyns is one of those writers who has been on my to-read list for so long that an almost mythic status has been assigned to her name in my mind. Based on reviews I've read through the years I was also uncertain as to what exactly to expect from her books. Sometimes these conditions can set the stage for disappointment when I finally get around to reading a writer's work. Thankfully such was not the case with Comyns. This novel encapsulates small-town domestic life rendered in a peculiar nonplussed style applied indiscriminately to events ranging from the grotesque to the sublime. Shocking to some at the time of its publication (e.g., banned in Ireland in 1954) though less so today, the book's refusal to treat the realities of morbidity and mortality any differently from those of everyday health and happiness is refreshing. The characters, both major and minor, are all drawn to memorable proportions. In particular, the patriarch of the family in focus, Ebin Willoweed, struck me as an anti-protagonist of the type found in novels of John Cowper Powys. Completely self-absorbed and riddled with eccentricities, Willoweed's character yields that incongruous blend of abhorrence and affection in a reader's response that is so rare to experience. As a writer, Comyns strikes me as a steadfast conductor leading a mad orchestra of characters through a hectic yet pitch-perfect piece of music, filled with melodic eddies nested between disharmonic crescendos. And she brings it all to a satisfying conclusion.

