



Cold Comfort Farm

Stella Gibbons , Lynne Truss (Introduction) , Roz Chast (Illustrations)

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Winner of the 1933 Femina Vie Heureuse Prize, COLD COMFORT FARM is a wickedly funny portrait of British rural life in the 1930s. Flora Poste, a recently orphaned socialite, moves in with her country relatives, the gloomy Starkadders of Cold Comfort Farm, and becomes enmeshed in a web of violent emotions, despair, and scheming, until Flora manages to set things right.

Cold Comfort Farm Details

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From Reader Review Cold Comfort Farm for online ebook

Barry Pierce says

Eh, it just wasn't for me. I really wanted to like this but it just felt too... saccharine. The sweetness of it turned sour in my mind. However, the writing is good and very simplistic, nobody would find any trouble with it. The cast of characters are very memorable and incredibly idiosyncratic. I did enjoy the parody of the novels of Hardy and the Brontës and such but it was very hit and miss for me. Oh well.

Beverly says

Best satiric novel ever written, bar none. I loved the movie too.

Antoinette says

This book is a satire and an homage to famous British authors such as Jane Austen, the Bronte's and Thomas Hardy to name a few.

Flora Poste is a recently orphaned socialite of little means. She is nineteen years old. She can choose to work or to live with relatives. She chooses to live with her country relatives, the Starkadders of Cold Comfort Farm. For one so young, she is a smart, savvy woman who decides she must improve the conditions on the farm. It was a joy to watch her work her magic. Think of the rural countryside of Thomas Hardy, the madwoman of Jane Eyre, the matchmaking of Emma and you've got Cold Comfort Farm.

One of my favorite lines: Flora says, " When I am 53 or so I would like to write a novel as good as "Persuasion", but with a modern setting, of course."

This was a fun, light hearted book that I thoroughly enjoyed!

Shovelmonkey1 says

I imagine that Stella Gibbons wrote Cold Comfort Farm from the artfully distressed comfort of a small garret-like room. Clad in a light tweed and perched gracefully in front of an oversized front strike, Smith-Corona type writer with a cup of tea in bone china cup and saucer just out of reach of the return of the barrel of the typewriter. I can also imagine her gently cackling to herself in polite and proper manner as she clattered out the lines which would come together to form the world of Cold Comfort Farm; Postes, Starkadders, Beetles, Myburns and all.

Flora Poste is bright eyed, knowing, impossibly perky and recently orphaned (if indeed 20-something ladies can be orphans). Apparently penniless with only £100 per year to her name (this was thought to be a paltry sum in Jane Austen's day so clearly young Ms Poste is gently skulking up financial shit-creek), she throws herself upon the mercy of her relatives and with jutting chin and determined step, strikes out boldly for Sussex and Cold Comfort Farm. There she is greeted by the biblically populous and biblically named Starkadder clan who are all the proud owners of names which make them sound much more like extras in Lord of the Rings than gentle farming folk.

Amos has his religion, Aunt Ada has her memories of something nasty in the woodshed, Elfine has her nature walks, Reuben has his chickens, Urk has his watervole obsession, Judith has Seth and Seth... well Seth has had just about everything with a pulse between Cold Comfort and Howling.

Speaking from personal experience, farms are not places where you are encouraged to either lie abed, think genteel thoughts or sit around doing nothing all day aside from acting as a kind of graceful mobile decoration to the general day to day background. Accordingly Flora Poste decides to engage herself in useful farm based activies - none of which actually involve agriculture or animal husbandry of any sort. Much better to take in hand the wayward social, sexual and psychological issues of the family at large. And this she does with some aplomb, although to fill in the detail would be a big old spoiler so you should just go and read this surprisingly enjoyable book instead.

This book made it to the 1001 list for being an incisive and witty dissection of rural life as seen through the eyes of a chic urbane invader or something like that.

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

If, like me, you've seen the 1996 movie adaptation of *Cold Comfort Farm*, with Kate Beckinsale, Ian McKellan, Joanna Lumley, Stephen Fry and Rufus Sewell (mmmm yum!), you'll know that there have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort Farm and that Aunt Ada Doom saw something "narsty" in the woodshed when she was two. God I wish I had a memory like that! All the joys of the movie and more are in the book, a wonderful, clever, *readable* satire of the classic rural novel et al Thomas Hardy and the like. Having finally read *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* I finally get the subtleties of *Cold Comfort Farm*.

This book is an absolute joy to read. It was first published in 1932 but set "in the near future", allowing for some fun liberties taken with the 20s and 30s of last century, including some surprisingly modern speech and sensibilities. Like I said, this is one of the most readable classic novels I've ever read, and I can definitely see myself re-reading it many times over the course of my life, and finding more joy in it each time.

Flora Poste finds herself an almost penniless orphan at 19, and decides to live off her relatives. Her best friend, Mrs Smiling, doesn't think it's a good idea but Flora is determined. Of the four relatives she writes to, only cousin Judith of Cold Comfort Farm provides her with enough of an enticement: speaking of "righting the wrong" done her father, and being in general very mysterious. Better the uncertainties of Cold Comfort than the old lecherous uncle in Scotland.

Cold Comfort Farm has a long history, the farmhouse having been burnt down, rebuilt, added to, burnt down, rebuilt and added to time and again over the centuries. It's bleak, and the Starkadders believe there is a curse on the farm. The dairy cows have names like "Pointless" and "Aimless" and keep falling apart. Literally. Garrulous Aunt Ada Doom holds them all in thrall, and refuses to let any of them leave. Her daughter Judith is miserable and a bit obsessive about her younger son Seth, who spends his time bedding the girls in the area; while her older son Rueben is obsessive about the farm but his father Amos, one of those fire-and-brimstone preachers, thinks to leave it to old Adam, who falls asleep while milking the cows and washes the dishes with a twig. It's a nuthouse, alright, including Judith's daughter Elfine who floats about the moors in a cape and romantisizes the young upper class Dick who lives nearby.

Flora immediately wants to fix things, and sets about figuring each of them out and improving things at Cold Comfort. She's a matter-of-fact young woman, intelligent and firm and with a dry humour. A writer, Mr

Mybug, who is working on a book about how the Brontë sisters stole their brother Bramwell's stories and passed them off as their own - because "no woman could possibly have written *Wuthering Heights*", is staying in the nearby village and becomes enamored of Flora, seeing breasts in every hill and penises in every - well, phallic-looking thing, on their walks together.

The stems reminded Mr Mybug of phallic symbols and the buds made Mr Mybug think of nipples and virgins. Mr Mybug pointed out to Flora that he and she were walking on seeds which were germinating in the womb of the earth. He said it made him feel as if he were trampling on the body of a great brown woman. He felt as if he were a partner in some mighty rite of gestation. (p.121)

This is such a delightful, tongue-in-cheek (and sometimes tongue-out-of-cheek) book, making gentle but merciless fun of rural life, for both the lower, working and upper classes. Everyone, in fact. Even Flora is not exempt from gentle ridicule. But it's not a mean-spirited book, nor a snobbish one. It's full of humorous details, eccentric characters and beautiful prose, and the pacing - yes, the all-important pacing - is swift but not fast, tightly plotted and structured and zipping. I'm very gushy with this book, I know, but I highly recommend it and it's a real shame that all Gibbons's other books are out of print, because I would love to read one.

Duane says

Cold Comfort Farm is a stinging satire and outrageously funny parody of the literature about rural English farm life, especially by Sheila Kaye-Smith, Mary Webb, and to a lesser extent, D.H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy. I haven't read much by the former mentioned authors to appreciate the full extent of Gibbons jabs, but it doesn't matter because the humor is obvious. Gibbons writing was very clever and her cast of characters would have made Dickens proud. Very funny and very entertaining. 4.5 stars.

Alex says

Virginia Woolf is enraged,

she writes to Elizabeth Bowen in 1932, that the esteemed Prix Etranger award has gone to someone named Stella Gibbons. "Who is she?" she asks. "What is this book?"

The Starkadders were not like most families. Life burned in them with a fiercer edge.

And when Flora Poste is flung among them in their great crouching, rotting farm, she immediately commences meddling. She aspires to write *Persuasion*, but she's more of an Emma herself - Emma accidentally transported to Northanger Abbey to find the Earnshaws squatting there.

There'll be no butter in hell.

But Flora is a tidy person: "Unless everything is tidy and pleasant and comfortable all about one, people cannot even begin to enjoy life. I cannot *endure messes*." So she promptly sets about tidying things - tidying things for Hardyan rake Seth, Pygmalion-ready Elfine, brimstone-breathing Amos, and even for poor Aunt Ada Doom (name your cat that) who saw something nasty in the woodshed*, which does beg the question,

has there ever been anything in a woodshed that was not nasty? Don't say wood. Leave wood in a woodshed for ten minutes and it's teeming with centipedes.

** yes I spent 20 minutes making that video, yes it was an excellent use of my time*

This is a very funny book. I don't know how far funny takes us. Is funny alone enough to make a book great?

And does literature have any sort of obligation to give good advice? Because no one should actually be like Flora. Flora works only in a very tidy world. In the untidy real world, people like Flora don't get invited to parties.

Gibbons is a little too pleased with herself by the end, which goes on like the last scene in Star Wars. We still have questions. Did the goat live? Will anyone ever find Graceless's leg, which fell off and no one even noticed for half a day?

To answer Virginia Woolf's question: Stella Gibbons wrote 22 books but we remember only this one, which has survived all this time because everyone just likes it very much. It has, pound for pound, the best names this side of Dickens. It's very funny and very tidy. There are worse things to give the Prix Etranger to.

Algernon says

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery.

Stella Gibbons turns her attention instead on having a good time and on romance, penning a rusticated novel of manners in which Flora Poste, a highly educated and sophisticated young lady from the London high society sets out to clear up the muddle of Cold Comfort Farm. The unprepared reader might be tempted to compare Gibbons with P G Wodehouse, and at least in one aspect, he/she will not be far off the mark : this is a laugh out loud comedy displaying wicked wit and sparkling turns of phrase. A more careful examination of the text reveals major differences in approach. While Wodehouse is escapist, focusing almost exclusively on clubhouse humour and wealthy young rascals pulling pranks while visiting sumptuous manors, Gibbons is launching barbed satirical arrows at the pomposity and pretentiousness of her literary peers, setting her sights on such big names as D H Lawrence, Emile Zola or Thomas Hardy. Some of these 'naturalist' school authors and critics felt outraged at the daring debut author lampooning of their favorite style, but I think modern readers will appreciate the liberating breath of fresh air through the dark and twisted avenues of atavistic passions they embraced (I believe I got the bug of flowery prose from Gibbons). In the foreword, the author explains:

I think, quite without meaning to, I presented a kind of weapon to people, against melodrama and the over-emphasising of disorder and disharmony, and especially the people who rather enjoy it. I think the book could teach other people not to take them seriously, and to avoid being hurt by them.

The novel then is built on the clash of two philosophies: Flora Poste versus the Starkadders. (no relation to the Blackadders other than as a source of top notch Brit humour). How did the two come together at Cold Comfort Farm?

The education bestowed on Flora Poste by her parents had been expensive, athletic and prolonged; and

when they died within a few weeks of one another during the annual epidemic of the influenza or Spanish Plague which occurred in her twentieth year, she was discovered to possess every art and grace save that of earning her own living.

versus : *There have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort.*

Left impoverished by her careless parents, Flora must impose herself for sustenance and shelter on distant relatives. She accepts the invitation to Cold Comfort Farm, somewhere in the middle of the Downs, where the extended Starkadder clan pass the time harvesting the 'swedes', gathering the 'sukebind', milking cows that are prone to lose their limbs when you turn your head, and in general living close to the land and harboring dark secrets in their hearts.

Their dumbness said: 'Give up. There is no answer to the riddle; only that bodies return exhausted, hour by hour, minute by minute, to the all-forgiving and all-comprehending primaeval slime'

Flora Poste, despite her young age, is a lady who knows what she wants from life and how to get it : *Unless everything is tidy and pleasant and comfortable all about one, people cannot even begin to enjoy life. I cannot endure messes.* She is determinate and bossy, devious and imaginative. When she witnesses the muddle of repressed emotions and twisted relationships she has landed in, she sets out immediately putting everybody in their places. In one of the most memorable scenes in the novel, the metaphor is put into practice when she releases Big Business, the long suffering bull kept locked in a dark and damp shed out in the open meadows, under the sun and the wind. Then she starts on her relatives, giving advice on family planning to a servant girl that gets pregnant year after year, agricultural advice to the serious older son, religious pointers to the family father, fashion tips to the scatterbrained young lady of the farm, and so on ...

The Starkadders were simply ripe for rows and mischief. Only a person with a candid mind, who is usually bored by intrigues, can appreciate the full fun of an intrigue when they begin to manage one for the first time. If there are several intrigues and there is a certain danger of their getting mixed up and spoiling each other, the enjoyment is even keener.

Only one person seems immune to Flora's emancipation program : Aunt Ada Doom, the secretive matriarch of the Starkadders, the spider queen who lives the life of a recluse, locked in her own chambers at the farm since youth (**I saw something nasty in the woodshed!** is her hilarious catchphrase), but pulling the strings of everyone else from that den, trying as hard to keep the Starkadders tied to the farm as Flora tries to liberate them.

Persons of Aunt Ada temperament were not fond of a tidy life. Storms were what they liked; pleanty of rows, and doors being slammed, and jaws sticking out, and faces white with fury, and faces brooding in corners, and faces making unnecessary fuss at breakfast, and plenty of opportunities for gorgeous emotional wallowings, and partings for ever, and misunderstandings, and interferings, and spyings, and, above all, managing and intriguing.

The screwball plot can be appreciated well enough without getting into academic research of the books and the characters lampooned by Gibbons, but these elements are integral to the text, and make the novel a good candidate for further inspection and for many re-readings. Some of the literary allusions are closer to the surface, my favorites being the encounters between Flora and the 'naturalistic' writer visiting the farm, Mr. Mybug, an annoying exponent of misogyny who cannot believe that Wuthering Heights could have been written by a woman. Flora deals succinctly with his silliness and with his attempts at seduction:

By now Flora was really cross. Surely she had endured enough for one evening without having to listen to intelligent conversation? Here was an occasion, she thought, for indulging in that deliberate rudeness which only persons with habitually good manners have the right to commit.

Regarding his literary theories, she is even more sharp:

One of the disadvantages of almost universal education was the fact that all kinds of persons acquired a familiarity with one's favourite writers. It gave one a curious feeling; it was like seeing a drunken stranger wrapped in one's dressing-gown.

The last quote stirs in me familiar feelings, such as finding one of my favorite five star novels here on Goodreads dismissed with a one star rating and sometimes even with a fierce rant about how much it sucks. And so it goes ...

Coming back to Gibbons' prose, the satire is even stronger in her manner of presentation. She devised a three star system for the benefit of critics, making it easier for them to identify the passages of high literary achievement, the ones so admired in her male counterparts. Here's just one example of what I'm talking about:

His huge body, rude as a windtortured thorn, was printed darkly against the thin mild flame of the declining winter sun that throbbed like a sallow lemon on the westering lip of Mockuncle Hill, and sent its pale, sharp rays into the kitchen through the open door. The brittle air, on which the fans of the trees were etched like ageing skeletons, seemed thronged by the bright, invisible ghosts of a million dead summers. The cold beat in glassy waves against the eyelids of anybody who happened to be out in it. High up, a few chalky clouds doubtfully wavered in the pale sky that curved over against the rim of the Downs like a vast inverted pot-de-chambre. Huddled in the hollow like an exhausted brute, the frosted roofs of Howling, crisp and purple as broccoli leaves, were like beasts about to spring.

I reached the end of the adventures of Flora Poste at Cold Comfort Farm much to soon, just as I wanted to spend more time in her company (useful hint : I hear there's a sequel !). Stella Gibbons is now for me much more than a screwball writer, she is a poster kid of both feminism and common sense. Dare I say she is better than Wodehouse? A case of apples and oranges here, why not enjoy both? I wish she were as prolific as the creator of Jeeves and Psmith, but her attacks on the literary establishment were not without consequences. Gibbons never reached the same success with her next novels. Sometimes though, reputations can be built on one hit wonders.

I have a few quotes left over, I didn't find a way to insert into the text, but I will add them anyway, hoping you will enjoy them even out of context:

Mrs. Smiling's character was firm and her tastes civilized. Her method of dealing with wayward human nature when it insisted on obtruding its grossness upon her scheme of life was short and effective; she pretended that things were not so: and usually, after a time, they were not. Christian Science is perhaps a larger organization, but seldom so successful.

A straight nose is a great help if one wishes to look serious.

There they all were. Enjoying themselves. Having a nice time. And having it in an ordinary human manner. Not having it because they were raping somebody, or beating somebody, or having religious mania or being doomed to silence by a gloomy, earthy pride, or loving the soil with the fierce desire of a lecher, or anything of that sort.

K.D. Absolutely says

Frankly, I used to think that British humor was bland until while I was reading this book. This is so funny that even if I didn't probably get some of the nuances of the 30's small farm in Howling, Sussex because of the town folk's different dialects, the scenes are hilarious. Imagining them and converting those situations to our local barrio, makes me want to forget my dream of writing a memoir and instead write a similar short novel like this. Probably with my hometown, specifically the coconut plantation, as the setting.

Cold Comfort Farm tells the story of **Flora Poste** the most delightful character that I so far encountered in British literature. She is as funny as Anne (of the Green Gables), as fun-seeker as Madame Bovary, as loving as Elizabeth Bennett but as bossy and nosy as Emma yet as human as well. She is this London orphan girl (like Jane Eyre and many other orphans in British literature) who has to live with her relatives in the mysterious Cold Comfort Farm. She is not your toddler orphan though. She is already 19 and she has other prospects but the allure of the farm, as she loves animals, is so strong that she leaves the city to see how she fits into a life in a county. Armed with her determination to change things around her, she transforms each life of her relatives - the ignitable and extremely obstinate family - **the Starkadeers**. At some point, I was imagining the Addams family minus their paper thin bodies as the farm people of Cold Comfort should be stout and healthy with all the fresh milk, barney and honey that are easily available.

They say that this book is a parody of the works of Mary Webb but I shame on me, I had to google to find out who she was. They also say that this is a satire particularly of the social machinations of (Jane) Austen, the melodramatic doom of (Thomas) Hardy and the overblown romanticism of (D. H.) Lawrence. I read at least one book by those authors (3 by Austen, the highest) but I did not really get the connections, e.g., why they are saying this. I just focused on the story and the funny situations. For example, when Flora is about to leave the train at the beginning of the story, her London relatives are at the platform of the train station. Her parting words to her relatives: "Feed the parrot!" Her relatives say: "What parrot?" (because they don't have parrot at their London apartment). Flora says: "Any parrot!" Isn't that funny? It's like when a gay radio DJ joked one morning saying that he would bring roses at home to give to his wife and they he realized that he doesn't have a wife hehe. Simple lines yet funny to me. I dunno. I am going crazy, I guess.

Just read this one, will you?

Roger Brunyate says

Rural Gothic

The humor of this glorious funny book resides mainly in Gibbons' masterly control of prose style; if you have only seen a filmed version, you know less than half of what the author has to offer. Yes, she creates a

wonderful gallery of extraordinary characters, and the story clips along nicely if rather predictably, but it is the author's language that really gets you laughing out loud. Written in 1932, the book is a parody of a certain kind of rural melodrama popular at the time, but of the authors mentioned by the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as models only D. H. Lawrence is still much read today. But no matter; there are strong echoes of Hardy and the Brontes as well, and anyway the language works just fine on its own. It ranges from gothic descriptions of a landscape primeval and stark, throbbing with the fecund sap of plant and beast, to gnomic sayings delivered in a rural dialect so thick as to be incomprehensible if one did not realize that half the words in it were probably made up by the author. And, as an added incentive, Gibbons has helpfully marked her most purple passages with two or three stars, "according to the method perfected by the late Herr Baedecker."

Flora Poste, twenty, fashionable, well educated, and recently orphaned, decides against working for a living so writes around to various distant relatives asking them to take her in. She decides to go to live with the Starkadders, some distant cousins whose alarming address is Cold Comfort Farm, Howling, Sussex. (This will seem less odd if you know English place-names, and throughout the book Gibbons' choice of names is both almost plausible and brilliantly absurd.) The farm is described in the first of the starred passages, beginning thus:

Dawn crept over the Downs like a sinister white animal, followed by the snarling cries of a wind eating its way between the black boughs of the thorns. The wind was the furious voice of this sluggish animal light that was baring the dormers and mullions and scullions of Cold Comfort Farm. The farm was crouched on a bleak hill-side, whence its fields, fanged with flints, dropped steeply to the village of Howling a mile away....

The extended family she meets there, all with short biblical names of Old Testament force, is equally dour, and the living conditions are primitive to say the least. The household is presided over by the matriarch, Great Aunt Ada Doom, who "saw something nasty in the woodshed" as a child and has barely emerged from her room since, but terrifies the others into submission for fear of completing her descent into total insanity. But Flora determines to take the farm and the family in hand, beginning with the youngest, the nature spirit Elfine, and working up to the old woman. The manner in which she does so forms the plot of the rest of the book.

The gothic style which the author handles so well depends upon the ability to evoke impending doom, and Gibbons virtually redefines the verb "impend." So the first half of the novel at least is superb. However, as light and warmth are brought into Cold Comfort Farm, the doom begins to dissipate. In nineteenth-century terms, Gibbons' influence changes from Bronte to Jane Austen, whom she can certainly match in witty observation, though at the loss of the gothic elemental power. The plot, too, lacks suspense; everything that Flora undertakes to do works out with few surprises; the main parody element at the end is the neatness with which it all does work out, even including the resolution of Flora's own romantic needs. But in exchange, as others on this site have mentioned, Stella Gibbons achieves a transformation of a different kind: the forbidding cast of caricatures to whom we are first introduced has become a family of real people, whom Flora finds herself caring about quite a lot. And the reader too. Skill of this sort takes Stella Gibbons beyond the ranks of a mere parodist and reveals her as a true novelist.

[I actually read the book in the older Penguin edition, which has a fine cover, quite relevant to the period, taken from a painting by Stanley Spencer. But it is rather sloppily printed. The Penguin de luxe edition (which I have seen but didn't buy) is much better produced, and has the added bonus of a cover by Roz Chast—a masterly match-up of two funny women working eighty years apart.]

Petra X says

Update I've just watched the film. It's even **better** than the book, by a long way. It's very affectionate, and very much played for gentle laughs. The cast is fantastic, some of the best actresses around including Eileen Atkins and Joanna Ab Fab Lumley, Stephen Fry and Ian McKellan. The attention to detail was stunning. Everything had been thought of - the lighting, colours and even face makeup of the women changed to reflect the lessening of the stranglehold Aunt Ada Doom had on the Starkadders and the lightness that Robert Post's child, Flora, brought to the farm. The ending was also an improvement on the 5* book.

If you like British films, this is so typical of gentle British humour. In an earlier decade it would have been an Ealing film. I don't think it could have been made in the US as most of the actors weren't remotely good looking. Even Elvine, playing a mini Eliza Doolittle role (an obvious pastiche) was rather average and the sex-obsessed and over-fertile girl had been made up to look like an unwashed farm girl. Only Kate Beckinsale (who is not the world's most brilliant actress, although she was competent here, was allowed to be a beauty.

I do recommend the film. And the book. Rarely do I see a film much better than a really good book, but this is it. John Schlesinger and Stella Gibbons, author and director, geniuses both.

When Aunt Ada Doom was just a small child, she saw "something nasty in the woodshed". And if it didn't blight her entire life, she certainly made sure it would blight, or at least add even more blight, to everyone else at Cold Comfort Farm, the family home and ancestral seat of the Starkadders.

Essentially this is the American tv series, the Hillbillies rewritten for 1930s Sussex and parodying Hardy, Lawrence, and various other Great British Writers, but is more related to the Hillbillies with incest, hellfire, strange obsessions (cows) and all manner of people who all have mental or emotional problems of the darker, more malign sort.

Into this maelstrom of petty evil, fear and ineptness, come the heroine. Flora Poste is the posh city cousin fallen on hard times whose father the Starkadders did something unmentionable to and feel guilty about so when she has nowhere to go, they take her in. But not willingly. She sorts them all out and brings them from their ignorant, Gothic-y insular life into the modern world.

It is a ridiculously funny novel, not as literary as the parodying might suggest. I haven't seen the film of it, only just learned there was one, which was apparently brilliant and stars top British actors and actresses (as opposed to 'stars' famous more for their beauty than any thespian ability). Sometimes I don't want to see the film of a favourite book in case the director hasn't seen it the same way as I have, but this time I want to.

Finished 26 Dec. 2011

Book review 19 May 2015

Film Review 24 May 2015

Matthew Gatheringwater says

This may be one of the funniest books ever written and I pick it up whenever I feel inclined to have a whine and a moan. The protagonist, Flora Poste, is a bracing antidote for anyone inclined to be a sad sack. A student of the higher common sense, she understands that there are few troubles in life than cannot be set to rights or at least ameliorated by good hygiene, good manners, correct thoughts, and the proper foundation garments.

What I admire most about Flora is her unwillingness to give in to the artistic fashion of celebrating the misery of the human condition. Rather than getting ensnared in the sukebind of life, she believes we must wield our scrantlets. "Nature," she says, "is all very well in her place, but she must not be allowed to make things untidy."

This edition of the book has the added pleasure of an appreciation of Stella Gibbons in the form of an introduction by Lynn Truss (in which we are treated to hear what Virginia Woolf--a bit of a sad sack herself--had to say about Gibbons) and irreverant cover illustrations by Roz Chast, (whose style will be instantly recognizable to *New Yorker* readers. In fact, my one criticism of this edition is that it isn't illustrated throughout.

Beyond the benefits of humor, this book has been invaluable as my first introduction to the works of the Abbe Fausse-Maigre, which have provided guidance and inspiration throughout my life.

El says

This is one of those books I've been trying to avoid for a while, inexplicably since I saw the 1995 movie, of which I remembered very little except for two words: Rufus. Sewell.

Oh, Rufus. It was this movie that made me fall for him, and then I saw Dark City, and that was it. Smitten. Don't ask me to explain it. I cannot. It would just be a stuttering mess of an anatomy lesson: "Cheekbones! Guh, eyes!" I don't know. It's just... when I see him, dirty things start happening inside. Maybe because in *Cold Comfort Farm* he played Seth, the sexy one with the smoldering sex-eyes, so appropriate.

I digress.

So, with my ravenous appetite for Rufus (who, I might add, is the only thing that makes the recent movie Hercules even remotely worth watching), why did I wait so long to read the book? Couldn't I just picture Rufus on every page? The thing is I'm notoriously bad at *reading* comedies. I watch them, I practically live one, comedies are great. But when I read humor? Strange things happen - like I don't recognize humor very well in print, or it feels so... cheap, or not as cute as it thinks it is. And I figured this would be one of those kinds of books.

It's not! It *is* funny, and it all works and I enjoyed it. Every freaking minute of it.

Flora Poste is a young woman who finds herself an orphan. (Not funny yet!) She's not quite old enough to live on her own, so she looks at a variety of options, different family members in different places, and lands on Cold Comfort Farm because, well... they don't turn her down and she wouldn't have to share a room with

a parrot. She doesn't have high hopes for the experience, though, being all... not-rural herself. But she goes and hilarity ensues (and by hilarity I mean I chuckled; I mean, let's not get crazy here).

It's just a fun read. It's not a perfect novel, but I enjoy the concept of it. It's a mockery of the melodramatic style of books written in the 1930s and before - DH Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, as a couple examples. I enjoyed that angle. There are a few open-ended questions, but that too is actually okay here. As in, I don't feel too troubled by it, though give me time and I could easily have a brain aneurysm over this.

If you're looking for complex characters, this is not the book for you. These characters are not deep, which I feel was also intentional. There are a *lot* of characters, but Flora is there to fix them all if she can. Who is she to decide? Well, that doesn't really matter. She's da boss and she will edumacate and free her extended family like it's her job. It's all fairly simplistic, and no one really *grows*, but again it didn't ruin the story for me at all. (Seriously, this is all so unlike me, I don't even know what's going on right now.)

I guess I just needed this light dose of humor right now. It just felt like perfect timing. I can't say the same will happen for you.

Interestingly enough, it's just like Rufus Sewell - well, without the eyes or the cheekbones or... whatever. I can't necessarily explain why I like the book (or want to jump his bones), but they both just work for me.

Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

Muriel Spark-ish Tartness: "Cold Comfort Farm" by Stella Gibbons

The first two-thirds of it are much funnier than the last third. Everything gets wrapped up incredibly neatly, which I suppose is the whole point, but it means there isn't a breath of air in the last pages, and you almost yearn for something to upset Flora's plans at the last minute. That said it's quite witty and clever throughout, and Stella Gibbons' sentence construction is a thing to behold: she kind of combines mid-twentieth century Muriel Spark-ish tartness with the flawless, rolling rhythm of the Victorian sentence (or something like that). I can't believe this was her first novel; it's so poised.

I did wonder why the novel is set 'in the near future' and why there's all the emphasis on flying and other kinds of technologies. Just to point up the primitiveness of Cold Comfort Farm?

If you're into Mundane Literature of the Victorian kind, read on.

Joey Woolfardis says

Read as part of The Infinite Variety Reading Challenge, based on the BBC's Big Read Poll of 2003.

"For, if she lived at Cold Comfort as a guest, it would be unpardonable impertinence were she to interfere with the family's mode of living; but if she were paying her way, she could interfere as much as she pleased."

A wonderful novel, possibly the only modern classic I will ever fully enjoy. Not a comedy but a satire, but done with a love for pastoral classical writing that I think the author felt slightly embarrassed by. Think of Austen's Emma and you have the protagonist, Flora. Think of Bertha Mason of Thornfield Hall and you have Aunt Ada Doom, but each pulled and twisted to become extremes. There are smatterings of Heathcliffe, Bathsheba, and all the other archetypes of Classical Literature. Great writing, though often too short and blunt (though we can blame my love of lengthy Victorian prose for this).

Modern Classics are often written as an antithesis to the ridiculously long Classics, yet condensation is not always welcome. Gibbons does it very well here and with a humour that is both mild and forthcoming. It is a Modern Classic with no grudges except, perhaps, just a desire to be a little more to the point.

"...Flora seated herself upon the bed and read aloud from the *Pensées*... "Can we be sure that an elephant's real name is elephant? Only mankind presumes to name God's creature; God himself is silent upon the matter."

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Diane says

Cold Comfort Farm is the perfect comfort read. It is a wonderful blend of British charm, comic characters, and a clever young woman at the heart of it all.

Flora Poste cannot abide a mess. After her parents died and left her with only 100 pounds a year, she decided to live off relatives for a while. She settles on some cousins, the Starkadders at Cold Comfort Farm in Sussex. When Flora arrives at the farm, she sets out to make some changes and tidy everything up, even if it means upsetting her strong-willed aunt, Ada Doom.

My favorite parts of the book are when Flora decides to give her wispy, poetry-loving cousin Elfine a makeover that improves her love life, and when Flora helps her cousin Seth become a movie star. Flora even comes up with the perfect way of dealing with her Aunt Ada, thanks to a well-timed Jane Austen quote.

This book is so delightful and has become such a favorite that I will never do it justice. I think this is the third time I've read it, and each time it makes me smile and laugh. (FYI, the 1995 movie version with Kate Beckinsale is also a delight.) I highly recommend *Cold Comfort Farm* the next time you want to lift your spirits.

Favorite Quotes

[Flora was asked what work she will do] "When I am fifty-three or so I would like to write a novel as good as *Persuasion*, but with a modern setting, of course. For the next thirty years or so I shall be collecting

material for it. If anyone asks me what I work at, I shall say, 'Collecting material.' No one can object to that."

"I have a tidy mind, and untidy lives irritate me. Also, they are uncivilized."

"One of the disadvantages of almost universal education was the fact that all kinds of persons acquired a familiarity with one's favourite writers. It gave one a curious feeling; it was like seeing a drunken stranger wrapped in one's dressing-gown."

Anne says

Stella Gibbons' affectionately comical nod to traditional Victorian novels had me laughing on the third page, when she explained a minor character's passion for her unparalleled, world-renowned collection of brassières. The characters in this book are so vividly realized, and they are all the more ridiculous for how seriously they take themselves.

The basic story, for anyone who is interested: When she is nineteen years old, Flora Poste's parents die, and as she does not want to earn her living, she decides to find some suitable relatives to live with. These turn out to be the Starkadders of Cold Comfort Farm ("There have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort..."), including Seth, who loves the talking pictures, Reuben, who wants to run the farm himself, Amos, the father who weekly preaches fire and brimstone to the people of Beershorn, Judith, the mother who spends most of her time languishing in her bedroom, and Aunt Ada Doom (what a splendid name!), who seems to have gone crazy after having seen "something nasty in the woodshed" when she was very young, and thus lords it over the rest of the family and refuses to let them leave the farm. Flora takes it upon herself to "tidy up" Cold Comfort Farm and free its inhabitants--her cousins--from their oppressively depressing lives.

This book is such a hoot--I recommend it to just about anyone. :)

Lobstergirl says

Nineteen year old Flora Poste, freshly orphaned and impossibly jaunty, decides to live with strange, barely civilized relatives in rural Sussex. The Starkadders are a mix of fire and brimstone religiosity, untrammeled sexual urges, pathological family ties, feigned mental illness, and general slovenliness. *Cold Comfort Farm* is a 1932 parody of Thomas Hardy, the Brontës, and D.H. Lawrence, with themes of Pygmalion and the meddling of Emma Woodhouse thrown in, and jabs at Eugene O'Neill, avant garde film, and Freud. It's kind of a hot mess, actually. The most flattering thing that can be said about it is that it's clever, for example, in this passage taking aim at Lawrence:

The reply came with clotted rage, but behind the rage were traces of some other and more obscure emotion; a bright-eyed grubbing in the lore of farmyard and bin, a hint of the casual lusts of chicken-house and duck-pond, a racy, yeasty, posty-toasty interest in the sordid drama of man's eternal blind attack and woman's inevitable yielding and loss.

I'm not sure who exactly is being mocked here, but I laughed at the absurd geometries of the farm:

Its stables and outhouses were built in the shape of a rough octangle surrounding the farmhouse itself, which

was built in the shape of a rough triangle. The left point of the triangle abutted on the farthest point of the octangle, which was formed by the cowsheds, which lay parallel with the big barn....

Leaving the house by the back door, you came up sharply against a stone wall running right across the yard, and turning abruptly, at right angles, just before it reached the shed where the bull was housed, and running down to the gate leading out into the ragged garden where mallows, dog's-body and wild turnip were running riot. The bull's shed abutted upon the right corner of the dairy, which faced the cowsheds. The cowsheds faced the house, but the back door faced the bull's shed. From here a long-roofed barn extended the whole length of the octangle until it reached the house. Here it took a quick turn, and ended....The dairy overlooked the front door, in face of the extreme point of the triangle which formed the ancient buildings of the farmhouse.

From the dairy a wall extended which formed the right-hand boundary of the octangle, joining the bull's shed and the pigpens at the extreme end of the right point of the triangle. A staircase, put in to make it more difficult, ran parallel with the octangle, half-way round the yard, against the wall which led down to the garden gate.

But it's also overly knowing and twee - Gibbons actually indicates in the text "what I consider the finer passages with one, two, or three stars" in the manner of a Baedeker travel guide recommending a hotel. You can't escape the fact that you're constantly being winked at, which after 200 pages feels like being bludgeoned with cudgels.

emma says

THIS BOOK RULES!!!!

I mean seriously, oh my god! It's funny. Flora (our protagonist) is a feminist queen of getting sh*t done and not taking anything from any man ever in the history of time. All the characters are hilarious. The language and voice are unreal. I want to live inside this book!!!!

Well, just kidding. All of my trying-to-move-in-and-permanently-inhabit-a-fictional-world energies are currently taken up by the film *Mamma Mia!: Here We Go Again* (2018). I am really tryna become Lily James as a young ~~Meryl Streep~~ Donna. I am purely certain that I could handle the whole Sam situation much better and end up with him in the end but also still get with Harry and Bill in the interval.

SOMEONE TALK ABOUT MAMMA MIA WITH ME I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW MUCH I LOVE IT.

But the book! I love the book, too.

Bottom line: Stella Gibbons you are a goddess among men and this book is DOPE AS HELL. Sorry it's the only thing you're remembered for in spite of a long and productive career as a novelist but also can you blame reading audiences the world over??? This is good sh*t.

Mike Puma says

Review, of sorts, may be found in Message 1.
