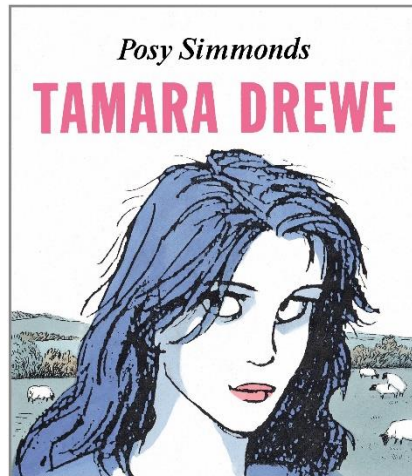


Tamara Drewe by Posy Simmonds MBE

[Contemporary Fiction]



"I think the real secret of being a writer is learning to be a convincing liar...
"I mean, that's what we are: story tellers... liars..."

Successful crime author Nicholas Hardiman should know: he's middle-aged, middle-class and thoroughly charming; but he's also a serial philanderer.

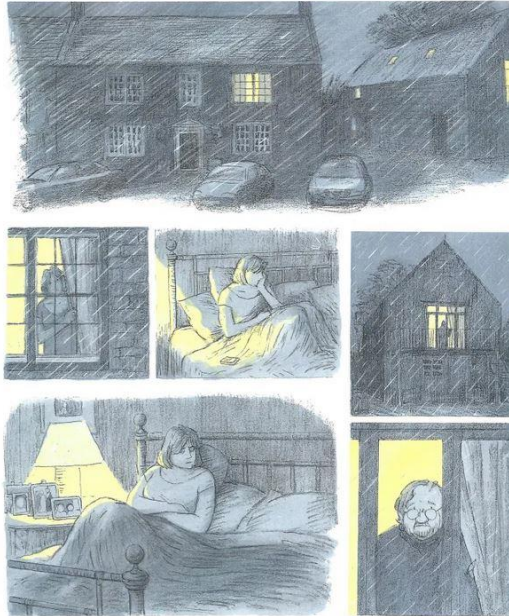
His wife Beth runs their retreat for writers out in the British countryside, cooking for its guests and typing up their daily manuscripts along with her husband's. She's more than his business manager, for she suggests plot points, like the tell-tale whiff after asparagus for dinner. Their gardener, Andy Cobb, used to live on Winnard's Farm until he was 14 when his family had to sell it. He resents the rich weekenders with their second homes, leaving the tiny village a lifeless skeleton: " No shop, no bus, no school, no post office, no community anymore! Just a load of ponced up, over-priced real estate."





There's little for the younger generation to do except hang around the abandoned bus shelter, throw mud at cows and obsess over celebrity rags and their papped stars' cellulite. So when sexy gossip columnist Tamara Drewe returns to Winnard's Farm where she too grew up after her parents bought it, there is a sudden surge of prurient interest. Andy falls for her; academic writer Glenn resents her openly; and the village teenagers dub her "Miss Plastic-Fantastic" after the nose job which transformed plain Tamara into an undoubted adult beauty. She certainly knows how to work it.

The final disruptive ingredient is Tamara's *beau* Ben Sergeant, ex-drummer of the Indie band Swipe. Ben is loud and aggressive, his boisterous dog worrying the cattle while its owner sneers at the writers and their retreat. But you know what the young are like about A-list celebrities: Jody develops an enormous, unrealistic crush on Ben, persuading easily led Casey to join her in stalking the couple then breaking into the farmhouse to rummage through Tamara's clothes and borrow one of Ben's dirty t-shirts. Then, on February 14th, Jody spies Tamara's laptop and sends the first of two fateful emails.



Lush pastel hues wash over the most graceful of lines and soft pencil shading, evoking the tranquil beauty of the rustic landscape, whether it's the fresh green sprigs of spring, the cold, crisp blue of a winter's night, or a vibrant shepherd's delight. As to the expressive faces, an elegant shorthand abounds in Tamara's soft mouth, bright doe eyes, naturally flowing hair and her casual city chic. Conversely, Jody, self-obsessed and self-indulgent, is all front teeth, with the eyes of a cat.

The layout is almost unique to Simmonds's books, being a hybrid of comics and prose, the hand-lettered panels wrapped around typed-up text as seen from the perspective variously of Beth, Glen and Casey, with the occasional column from Tamara. It's no easy task to pull off, but very easy to read, the panels usually driving the narrative, at other times acting as parenthetical asides.

Posy's grasp of modern slang and priorities lends Casey's observations a perfect credibility, while Beth's mental handwringing, stewing over not only what Nicholas might be up to but also how she's supposed to react is sadly spot-on. Antony Quinn described Posy Simmonds as "the laureate of English middle-class muddle, a peerless observer of their romantic confusions, emotional insecurities and professional vicissitudes. She gets to the heart of them more incisively and wittily than any number of her contemporaries..." and that too is spot-on. The plot threads are intricately entwined and the conclusion is far from abrupt, playing the ramifications out over a couple of dozen pages along with an extra twist.

A quintessentially British work, it's quiet, clever and observant, with the constant threat of turmoil and tragedy. Recklessness, deceit and outright sabotage: it'll all end in tears as everyone comes undone.

"What can happen? What can ever, ever happen in this place?"
You'd be surprised.