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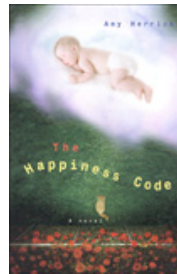
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THE HAPPINESS CODE

by Amy Herrick

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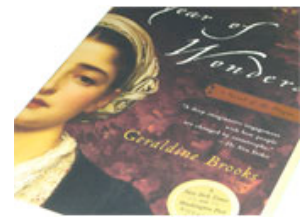


INTRODUCTION

We all share the fundamental desire to be happy. Nature predisposes us with instincts to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and while the wish to be content is nearly universal, the goal is elusive. **The Happiness Code** questions the very idea of happiness, addresses the value of pain, and illustrates the strength of love, reading like a mystery, a romance, and a science fiction novel all at once. From the moment we meet the Sorensons on moving day, omens are at play and collisions with destiny are rife. Numerous happenings merge into the lives of the Sorensons and their friends that prove both magical and scientific, and challenge their very identities and belief systems.

Pinky and her husband, Arthur, possess very different souls. She is passionate and he is controlled. He is systematic and she is whimsical. He lives his life according to his social code of responsibility and she prefers to be guided by her notions of individual fate. One of their paramount marital struggles is whether or not to expand their family. Pinky wishes with all her heart for a second child and Arthur cannot stand the thought of further contributing to overpopulation: "since he was realistically pessimistic about the future of the human race, he had, from the outset, told Pinky many times that he had no intention of contributing any fruit from his loins to the sinking ship" (p. 69). Pinky clearly loves her son, Teddy—who is, like his father, inquisitive and scientifically minded—but "there was something too singular and sober about him" and Pinky feels a younger sibling would make him less serious. Because while Teddy is very imaginative (he concocts invisibility positions and test them out on ants), Pinky worries that he needs another perspective on life and hopes the addition of a lighthearted soul "would give him a different angle to see from, a youthful companion...who could

some kind of wonderful



Year of Wonders

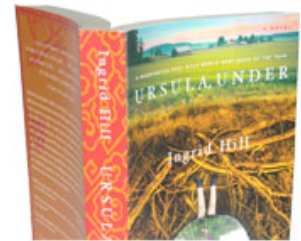
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lighten things up a little" (p. 4), and who might improve all their lives. Arthur resists her attempts to conceive but, shockingly, contradicts his beliefs when he secretly agrees to donate sperm for the artificial insemination of a colleague, an act that will turn his family life upside down and—ultimately—fulfill Pinky's wishes.

Despite Pinky's crusade and Arthur's secret, the story unfolds with the family settling peacefully in their new Brooklyn home. Teddy is especially taken by the novelty of having his own backyard to explore. Oedipus, the family cat, tests his wings, too, by venturing into the neighbors' territory, which leads to an adventure unlike any he has ever had in his feline life. Pinky happily focuses on matchmaking between her best friend, Fran, and Arthur's good friend Maury, and everyone gathers again and again in the enchanted little backyard. The coincidences that unfold and the subsequent events are magical in their own way—the reoccurrence of "the purple and black cloud shaped like a woman shelling peas" (p.123) signals a life-changing event, and "a flash of lightning and then a great kettledrum of thunder" (p. 149) sweeps it in—but it isn't until after the discovery of a beaming infant in the backyard that truly miraculous things begin to happen. With the acceptance of the child, his sudden disappearance, and the crusade to get him back, Pinky's life and the lives of those around her are shaken to the core, restored, and then changed forever.

ABOUT AMY HERRICK

Amy Herrick, author of **At the Sign of the Naked Waiter**, is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her fiction has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including **The Kenyon Review**, **The Yale Review**, **TriQuarterly**, and **Prize Stories 1992: The O. Henry Awards**.

AN INTERVIEW WITH AMY HERRICK

What inspired you to write *The Happiness Code* and how did the process and/or approach differ from your first work of fiction, *At the Sign of the Naked Waiter*?

There were a lot of little sparks that conspired to set this story in motion, but the first one was an article I read in the science section of the **New York Times**. It described a research project that followed a large group of people's happiness levels over a long period of time. The results seemed to indicate that each person has a certain set "happiness point." People's mood levels might go up or down somewhat according to circumstances, but generally an individual's mood level maintained itself at the same place. Thus, cheerful people appeared to stay cheerful all their lives and the less contented stayed less contented all their lives. Money, fame, good fortune, divorce, disasters, floods, didn't seem to really make a dent one way or another. This fatalistic notion that we are born

with certain unchangeable characteristics that dictate the destiny of our moods both unnerved and irked me (especially having already spent zillions of dollars in therapy in the hope of making myself into a more lighthearted sort). Out of my grumpy meditations on this article came the idea for Bernard, the magically happy baby.

At the Sign of the Naked Waiter was really written as a string of linked episodes. These episodes were written one by one over a long period of time and when I finished the one that seemed to be the logical ending point for the book, I went back and did some reshaping so the episodes hung together within a larger frame.

The Happiness Code was written differently. I had resolved before I sat down to it that I wanted to write a novel with a more traditional beginning, middle, and ending and to tell one story that a reader would be eager to take sail with. Of course, it didn't work out quite like that. If Bernard, the happy baby, was for all practical purposes the beginning point of the story, he acted sort of like a kernel of popcorn out of which exploded a great tangle of other related stories which all took on a life of their own. All of them had to be dealt with and taken into account before I could get to the end, so the project was far less simple than I had anticipated. But when it wasn't agonizing torture, it was pretty much fun.

In the very beginning of the novel you explain that the story takes place "a few days or years into the future" but that, more or less, everything to do with the journey of life "is exactly the same as it always has been and always will be." Your characters withstand the commonplace of biotechnology in their futuristic life by upholding fundamental beliefs of family and morality. Yet, with the growing acceptance of anti-depressants into our society, more and more people are beginning to accept the idea of altering the brain in order to maintain a happier existence. Do you believe, if it were now possible to assure that a child would be permanently happy, that most parents wouldn't opt for it? Is there something valuable learned from experiencing pain and unhappiness? Do you think this will always and forever be recognized by people no matter what the future brings?

Such a hard question to answer! I have found myself, as a parent, just as foolish as many other folks around me when it comes to wishing to save my children from suffering and pain. Yet I firmly believe that allowing a child a reasonable amount of these things is necessary for the development of so many aspects of the mature self. Pain teaches us innumerable lessons, not least, where danger lies. And without unhappiness how can we recognize happiness when it comes? Most importantly, having experiences of suffering and pain gives us the ability to feel compassion for others. I hope this will always and forever be recognized by people no matter what the future brings. If it isn't, we are going to become an even nastier species than we are already are.

This, however, is not to imply that I think of Bernard as in any way

nasty or evil. I intended Bernard as a special case, one of those occasional visitors who is sent around to show us a thing or two.

Being a mother and a resident of Brooklyn yourself, did you draw any of the material for your characters from your own personal experience and worldview?

Brooklyn looms large as an inspiration for this story—Prospect Park, the sidewalks of Park Slope, the little backyards of Windsor Terrace. Most of the characters were inspired by my friends and things they've said or done. Two examples that stick out in my mind:

When my friend Mitchell, a man of tireless and awesome conscience, finally decided to get married he warned his wife-to-be that he was going to ask people not to give them wedding gifts because he didn't believe people should get weighed down at the outset of a journey like this with a lot of unnecessary junk. If friends gave the two of them money, he was reserving the right to give away his half to worthy causes. Orra, his wife-to-be, was a tolerant and lighthearted sort and she accepted this with good humor. I kept picturing them in my mind's eye, she happily clutching her bouquet, he grimly distributing wads of money to the less fortunate. I realized this picture kept resonating with memories of my own parents and with my own marriage as well. It's a picture I've always wanted to write about.

Second example: My younger son has always been very fond of making magical potions. One day, when he was seven, I went into my kitchen and found him intently mixing up some strange mess in a plastic container. When questioned, he said he was making an invisibility formula. He'd always wanted to be invisible so he could sneak up on people. When I asked him what was in the container, he said it was secret and he couldn't tell me all the ingredients, but amongst other things, he had mixed in dish soap, flour, toothpaste, garlic, and a couple of dust balls from under his bed and some other stuff. I warned him that whatever he did he shouldn't drink this. He just smiled at me enigmatically and told me not to worry. I then went downstairs to let the dog out and, upon my return to the kitchen, noticed that my son had disappeared. I called and called and looked all over the house, but couldn't find him anywhere. I had this creepy feeling that any second he was going to sneak up invisibly behind me and yell "Boo!" but he turned up outside on the front stoop playing ball a few minutes later.

This little incident gave me the creative starting point for Teddy, Pinky and Arthur's catastrophe-minded son, who is intent upon mixing up an invisibility potion so he can save the world.

A lot of the magic in the novel takes place in the Brooklyn backyard. How essential is such space to a family?

It's essential for children to have a way to get outside to a place where there's a bit of sky above them. But almost anything will suffice, I think—a cow pasture, a fire escape, a suburban lawn.

Each brings its own riches and children have a great capacity for making the most of what they're given.

I myself didn't get a Brooklyn backyard until the late eighties, but when I did I immediately fell head over heels in love. Grass! A pear tree! A place to grow some flowers! There's something about little city gardens like this, the secretness of them, the way they are tamed and enclosed, yet still trembling with the desire to return to the original wildness they came from, that lends them the magical quality of being themselves and yet more than themselves. Over the years mine has changed and been used in many different ways, the kids and the animals turning it to many different purposes, but, for me, it's always been a refuge, a place to step outside to, to remove myself from the many dramas raging through the inside of the house.

Pinky and Arthur seem to be disappointed by each other's personalities at times. While their opposite views provide their children with a well-tempered environment, what do you feel their relationship says about love and partnership?

It is in our natures to search for the other who will "complete" us, but in finding those qualities that we admire and lack, we often discover ourselves taken aback by their very foreignness. Part of what I hoped to do in this story was re-create the workings of one of those odd dualities, or joining of opposites, that one often finds in marriages—to demonstrate how nature, with her usual illogical genius, tends to pair us off this way, the light and the dark, and what hard and occasionally gratifying work it makes for us poor humans.

What sort of research did you do for the character of Oedipus and how did you choose his name? What was it like to put yourself into the head of a domestic cat?

Oedipus is based on a big orange tiger who wandered into my little Brooklyn backyard one day and stayed on. He was a lordly, imperious fellow who never became completely domesticated. I always had the feeling that he was watching us and all of our shenanigans with a certain snickering amusement. Putting myself in his head was a great adventure, especially as I was not sure till the very end exactly how many lives he did have left.

As for the name Oedipus, it came to me from wherever such things come from. I thought it a nice kingly name for a cat and that it resonated well with some of the other preoccupations of the story.

Between the haunting of Uncle Claremont and the events unfolding around Pinky, there seems to be an incredible female power aligned with things supernatural. Was this meant to be gender specific?

Actually, it seems to me a possibility that almost everyone in the story has powers aligned with the "supernatural." The problem is that not everyone chooses to recognize those powers. That

willingness or ability may have some genderized aspects. This, then, raises a further question about how our perceptions determine what is real and what is not.

Susan Edelman is a woman whose own family was broken. Were this not the case, would she be less of a cruel character or is it simply in her nature? What sort of a contrast did you have in mind in the juxtaposition of the two households?

I'm not sure who Susan would have been had her "luck" not been so bad, although I know that I wish the reader to wonder about this and have some sympathy for her. And to consider the idea that although unhappiness works on different people in different ways—breaking some and making others stronger—it always behooves us to try to understand others, as I've harped on before, with compassion.

I suppose I put the two families next to each other, in part, to test each other, in part to help draw Arthur closer to a recognition of his own good luck and to draw out that piece of himself that he tries so hard to keep in the dark.

I wanted, as well, to raise questions about destiny and luck—if there is any meaning or pattern to these, and if there are possibly outside forces taking an interest in what happens to us.

What are your next writing projects?

I'm currently at work on three projects, all of which, I recently realized, importantly feature a dog. The first is a new novel for adults about the relationship between a difficult teenager and his mother. The teenager, who is obsessed with building robots, happens, during a walk in the park with his three-legged dog, to come upon a set of directions for building some sort of machine of perhaps not earthly design. The story unfolds from there.

The second project is a novel for young adults. It's a fantasy that takes place largely in Brooklyn at around the time of the winter solstice. It's about a group of youngsters who notice a number of odd things going on, including the fact that all the hours of the day seem to be getting shorter and shorter. They find themselves battling the Obblidawroth, an Entropic-like shape shifter, who has tricked its way into our world in the hopes of eating up all the time and tipping our world over into the darkness. The kids are helped along by a mysterious stray dog and some of the Old Folk who still reside in the caves and streams of Prospect Park.

The third is a picture book for younger children set in an earlier time. It is about an absentminded boy who is sent to the corner for some eggs and butter by his mother. He doesn't realize till he gets home that he has left his dog tied up in front of the store. When he goes back, the dog is gone. The story tells about the adventures he must go through to become reunited with his lost pal.

The dog thing is a fairly new phase of life for me. Up until recently I was a cat person, but my sons finally prevailed a couple of years

ago and I caved in and we brought home a mutt. I've been mostly enjoying the experience, though I still don't much like having my face licked.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Pinky wants a child to complement the seriousness in her son, Teddy, "somebody who would give him a different angle to see from...somebody on friendly terms with the absurd." In many ways that's what she has in Arthur and that's what she's seeking in the union of Fran and Maury. Do you believe that opposites attract? How essential is it to one's happiness and development to be aligned with something that challenges a person against his or her nature?
2. Arthur and Pinky are representatives of each side of the brain. Arthur is pragmatic and mathematical, and Pinky is artistic and whimsical. Do you think one of them is more in touch with himself or herself than the other? How does their relationship in the beginning of the novel compare with it in the end? What lasting effect does their experience with Bernard have on their marriage?
3. At different points throughout the novel, Pinky mentions or sees a cloud that symbolizes to her a harbinger of some sort of run-in with destiny. What is it about Pinky that enables her to see such things? What is her relationship to nature and spirituality?
4. Arthur is described as being "uninterested in the personal," yet his relationship with Billy Edelman becomes just that. Why do you think he decides to interfere with Mr. Edelman's plan to "take care" of his family? And do you think his commitment in the end of the novel (to be responsible for the interference by staying involved) reflects his obligation to social responsibility?
5. As an infant, Bernard is a happy disaster. He is content in any situation and his self-satisfaction makes him an attractive being. But his permanent disposition limits him from feeling pain and thus he does physical harm to himself over and over again. How essential is pain and the ability to be unhappy important to a being's growth? Do you think one can learn to avoid negative situations without feeling direct emotional and physical consequences?
6. Bernard does to Teddy exactly what Pinky had wished for, but in Teddy's view, it is unpleasant. His previously peaceful and introspective world is interrupted by this

happy baby, and, more often than not, the baby's presence is destructive. Do you think that Teddy was in need of such a sibling or companion? Do you think Bernard has the sort of positive effect on him that Pinky hoped for?

7. Whether it is the mice or Bernard, the "experiments" of the HDR deficiency project have a propensity to express their happiness through singing or cooing. What is it about the mice "singing" that irritates Ken Fishammer so much? Why does it equally unnerve Arthur when he witnesses it in Bernard?
8. What kind of a person do you think Ken Fishammer is? Is his experiment truly to benefit humanity or is it a selfish and sadistic pursuit? Arthur is openly concerned for humanity, yet in the end, he chooses to look out for his family and protect his child instead of making a sacrifice for human progress. With the likelihood of biotechnology being a commonplace among us in the future, what are your feelings on an experiment such as this?
9. Arthur identifies himself as a politically minded man, firmly rooted to his beliefs. He will not have another child because of his politics, yet in the name of those same politics, he helps Marina create a child. In the end, when Arthur fights to reclaim Bernard, has he abandoned his social convictions or is he further instating them? What is better for human progress, the potential to design consistently happy humans, or the fight to keep it from happening?

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