ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

CULTURE

America Never Promised Us Happiness (Only the Right to Pursue It)
L. A. Lemmons
21 Pages
978-0-9887082-0-4
Three Stars (out of Five)

Provocative and thought-provoking, L. A. Lemmons' *America Never Promised Us Happiness (Only the Right to Pursue It)* leaves few unscathed in her criticism of the cultural promise of happiness and how to achieve it.

So, you think you know what happiness is? Outspoken author L. A. Lemmons thinks you're probably wrong, but don't worry; it's not your fault. In her wide-ranging, provocative critique of modern society, *America Never Promised Us Happiness (Only the Right to Pursue It)* , Lemmons sets out to prove that the very culture that defines your happiness is not only expert at, but also dependent upon, its ultimate denial.

In more than fifty far-reaching chapters, Lemmons describes the ways that organizations set people up for failure, luring them in with the promise of happiness and then pulling a quick bait-and-switch routine that snatches the prize from their grasp. Advertisers hold impossible standards of beauty, and religions pin followers' hopes on an afterlife fantasy, says Lemmons. Our world is very much like Oz, she suggests, and we follow Dorothy down the yellow brick road, looking for things we don't need or already possess: "Emerald City wasn't all it was cracked up to be."

Corporations and their advertisements may be at the top of Lemmons's list of likely suspects in the war against individual satisfaction, but they are not the only culprits here, by far. Clusters of chapters implicate a wide range of institutions: government, military, education, science, marriage, religion, and charities. Lemmons is emphatic in her arguments and clearly passionate. Some sections, however, are more convincing than others.

For instance, in criticisms of the American public education system, the book quotes the work of educator John Taylor Gatto on the hidden agenda of public schools. This provides historical, sociological, and psychological evidence to support the idea that schools exist for the student's integration into society more than his or her self-actualization. Whether the reader

agrees or not, the internal logic is sound.

On other subjects, supporting evidence comes from *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips or favorite film quotes, which offer some comic relief but do little to legitimize Lemmons's bold statements, like, "Every plant, insect, and animal is genetically programmed to be selfish." While Lemmons' is likely referring here to Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, she doesn't mention him in the text or in her notes, leaving readers unfamiliar with Dawkins' work somewhat adrift. Selected references, links, and notes provided at the end of the book offer a closer look at many topics, but in the body of the book, Lemmons often treats her perspective as self-evident when more supporting data would be useful.

Lemmons has a lot to say about societies and the self; she has been working on this book for over ten years. *America Never Promised Us Happiness* could be a valuable addition to college level philosophy and political science classes, particularly if used to spark discussion and debate among students.

Sheila M. Trask