

★ Happy like This

Ashley Wurzbacher

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The private, intimate stories of Ashley Wurzbacher's *Happy Like This* navigate deciphering oneself with impeccable logic. Unfastening and opening the shell around each narrator's heart, answers hang over the collection, both banner and pall. In these stories, it's impossible to "be still, be safe," even when alone.

Two sections, "Like That" and "Like This," divide the ten stories. Like the title, these sections reflect a Virginia Woolf quote prefacing the book: "They're happy like that; I'm happy like this." In the stories that comprise "Like That," narrators are outsiders who examine others' differences, while the narrators in "Like This" are insiders provoked by some novel influence to consider themselves within their various social realities.

Even at their most isolated, these narrators display how interdependent people are, all the more so within the solitude of themselves. Whether belonging, love, pain, understanding, transformation, endings, or, more often, a quagmire of all of these, what's sought can only be discovered in relationship to others. The relationships within stories are varied and riveting: "Sickness and Health" traces a graduate student's study of undergrad girls with factitious disorders; "Happy Like This" probes the layered love between two women linguists whose friendship, even in its constancy, reverberates with the potential for endings and beginnings.

Wurzbacher understands "intimately the ways in which people change: rapidly, without warning." As various narrators find their ways, a necessary union between separation and discovery emerges. Nothing that causes growth is neutral, and the more necessary the connection a narrator forms, the greater the chance that the connection contains either an expiration or an explosion of the status quo.

Full of the strange ordinariness of relating, *Happy Like This* hits a nerve, vital and bewitching "because of its suggestion that there is no universal language, none at all, that even the language of desperation is particular and private."

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (November / December 2019)

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