



# The Happiness Myth: Why What We Think Is Right Is Wrong

*Jennifer Michael Hecht*

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*"We think of our version of a happy life as more like physics than like pop songs; we expect the people of the next century to agree with our basic tenets—for instance, that broccoli is good for a happy life and that opium is bad—but they will not. Our rules for living are more like the history of pop songs. They make weird sense only to the people of each given time period. They aren't true. This book shows you how past myths functioned, and likewise how our myths of today function, and thus lets you out of the trap of thinking you have to pay heed to any of them."*

*The Happiness Myth* is a fascinating cultural history that both reveals our often silly assumptions about how we pursue happiness today and offers up real historical lessons that have stood the test of time. Hecht delivers memorable insights into the five practical means we choose to achieve happiness: wisdom, drugs, money, bodies, and celebration.

Hecht liberates us from today's scolding, quasi-scientific messages that insist there is only one way to care for our minds and bodies. Hecht looks at contemporary happiness advice and explains why much of it doesn't work. "Modern culture," she writes, "is misrepresenting me and spending a lot of money to do it."

Rich with hilarious anecdotes about both failed and successful paths to happiness, Hecht's book traces a common thread of advice—she calls it "sour charm wisdom"—that we can still apply today to create authentic, lasting happiness.

## The Happiness Myth: Why What We Think Is Right Is Wrong Details

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## From Reader Review The Happiness Myth: Why What We Think Is Right Is Wrong for online ebook

### Tamlynem says

This book changed my view on several topics--drugs and life-perspective are two that come to mind. One of the themes that she talks about is "Take what's yours." It sounds like settling, but it also is about being satisfied with what you have. It's a little zen, I guess. She quotes Marcus Aurelius a lot.

On drugs, she points out that they have been a part of cultural celebrations for all of human history and that our current definition of "drug" is arbitrary. Also she cites some lesser-known historical examples to show that as far as health goes, we will probably find out we're doing a million things that are terrible for us now that we don't even know yet. So why freak out if you don't follow your Dr.'s instructions to the letter? I really enjoyed this book. Everyone can get something out of it.

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### -uht! says

"When you hear that so-and-so has said something horrid about you, you remember the ninety-nine times when you have refrained from uttering the most just and well-deserved criticism of him, and forget the hundredth time when in an unguarded moment you have declared what you believe to be the truth about him. Is this the reward, you feel, for all your long forbearance? Yet from his point of view your conduct appears exactly what his appears to you; he never knows of the times when you have not spoken, he knows only of the hundredth time when you did speak." -Marcus Aurelius

"The essence of philosophy is that a man should so live that his happiness shall depend as little as possible on external things." -Marcus Aurelius

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### Todd says

I'm not a fan of self help and self improvement books. In fact, I think 99.9% of them are pure bullshit. Fortunately, "The Happiness Myth" is not one of them. Rather than trying to present her readers with another lame new age formula for happiness, Jennifer Michael Hecht uses her training as a historian to look back at the ways people have pursued happiness over the whole course of human history, point out some basic traits that seem to have worked over and over agin, and compare them with our (apparently rather silly) current views about what creates happiness. Her conclusions are complex, often surprising, and frankly not all that optimistic. But as an old curmudgeon in training myself, I enjoyed her insights and would recommend this book to anyone looking for a fresh take on what makes humans happy.

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### Dave says

This book was inaccurately named and that annoyed me. The main idea seems to be to consider how much culture influences our definitions and actions when it comes to happiness. There's some interesting perspective, historical, philosophical, and anthropological, though sometimes more than I wanted to handle.

The most resonant section for me was in regards to different types of happiness. The author broke it down into three types- day to day, euphoria, and life-long. Her point was that trying to achieve one of these types of happiness often puts us at odds with another type.

Her sections on our need for community festivals and vigils was very interesting, especially on the way it related to our need for news.

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### **Sylvester says**

Enjoyed the author's investigations into the changing views on health, food, etc. Some of the weird fads out there! And I had no idea that Marcus Aurelius of all people was an opium addict - and Elizabeth Barrett Browning?!! Amazing! A lot of food for thought in this book. My favorite line - "The fact that something makes perfect sense doesn't mean it is true." And another one - "Think about how strange it is that the same culture would invent escalators, elevators, StairMaster machines and step classes." I don't know that I agree with Hecht on some of her conclusions, but this was an interesting and often funny read.

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### **Todd Martin says**

Just to be clear ... "The Happiness Myth" is NOT a self help book. It's an academic look at the cultural and historical attitudes and behaviors that were felt to contribute to happiness and how these views have shifted over time. Disparate topics include money, drugs, sex, food, wisdom and celebration.

It's clear we have a complex relationship with the things that contribute to happiness. Examples of these shifting attitudes include:

Money as the root of all evil, yet the large role it plays in our day-to-day lives and in meeting basic needs.

Food as both a means of celebration and as a cause of obesity and disease.

Shopping as a source of short lived joy and rising debt.

Legal, illegal and prescription drugs and the ways they are viewed within societies.

Hecht offers some interesting insights into some of the historical basis behind shifting cultural attitudes towards these themes and posits that societal views are likely to continue to evolve through time.

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### **McNeil says**

I think a lengthy quotation from the book would best sum it up: "This book has also addressed the matter of truth for its own sake--not to do with happiness, but with reality. Consider a whole century of men and women straining to conserve the body's energy, minimizing sport and exertion in order not to overspend their reserves, and then the entire next century straining to exercise the body so that it will become more efficient. You have been told by physicists and yogis that reality is not what it seems, that your mind makes the world you live in, and you believe it; but you also don't believe it. Half the point of this book was for me to try to cheer everyone up at once. The other half was to demonstrate ways that we look up at the blue sky and say 'green.' What I have offered is, in its own way, a philosophy. I have tried to show the disjuncture between what we do and what we say we are doing. I hope I have marshaled the evidence necessary to show what a vague hold on reality we have" (319).

Seriously, she shows with millenia worth of examples, how we are duped by our culture into believing that what we are experiencing and seeing (all products of nothing else than our culture) is some how the Truth.

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### **Elaine Nelson says**

This may in fact be the most useful bit of philosophy I've ever read. The general premise: understanding the crazy things that made people happy in the past, or that people thought would make them happy, will help you (dear reader) see and consider how crazy our own ideas are now. And for me at least, it worked.

She covers all the big topics: sex, money, drugs, food, and celebrations, with lots of exceptionally weird info along the way. Most useful, though, is her division of "happiness" into 3 kinds: good day (cake, naps), euphoria (skydiving, religious revelations), and good life (fulfillment, family). It helps in the same way that Bruce Schneier's explanation of security tradeoffs helps in that area: you become more conscious of what it is that you're trading off.

Highly, highly recommended.

(Also, I want to go find some Marcus Aurelius now.)

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### **John Crippen says**

I first learned of Jennifer Michael Hecht's newest title, his interview with her on the Point of Inquiry podcast. I highly recommend listening to the interview before reading the book. It gives a very good feel for Hecht's personality and approach to the subject.

The book begins with a definition of the three distinct kinds of happiness: a good day, euphoria and a happy life. I really enjoyed the philosophy/psychology in this section, regarding how the three kinds of happiness are very different and often at odds with each other (for example, a good day might include celebrating by eating and drinking a lot at a party...which cannot be done every day and still allow you to maintain a happy life). Next, Hecht reviews the four ancient happiness wisdom imperatives to know yourself, control your desires, take what's yours and remember death, then spends the largest section of the book covering four areas of happiness: Drugs, Money, Bodies and Celebration. In each area, she reviews the historical perspectives and contrasts them to today's "cultural trance definition" of happiness. A brief Conclusion encourages the reader to consider what they are doing to nourish/create each of the three kinds of happiness and exhorts the reader to get out there and do something and note how well it works.

The overall message from the book for me was that we live under the strong spell of our culture's definitions of happiness. The antidote to that spell is an historical understanding of happiness.

The book was easy to read, since the subject was very interesting to me. Hecht writes in the first person, so reading the book is like listening to her give a lecture. This caught me off guard at first, but you get used to it. The familiarity of the first person style is balanced by rigorous footnotes and references.

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### **Lost in a Good Book says**

I really enjoyed how Jennifer Hecht unpicked society. I love challenging how I see the world and why, and found much of her thinking creative and inspiring. She's articulate and convincing and the book is well researched.

I recommend it for everyone - yes, everyone. She confronts how socially "manipulated" all our thinking is, and gives great evidence to prove it. From drugs to our bodies to what we eat and how we celebrate, this book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand why they think what they think!

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### **Nick says**

Wonderful book which challenges a number of accepted viewpoints, such as that money can't buy happiness. The author is a very intelligent historian and philosopher, and 90% of the book is full of her intriguing insights into cultural history, always pushing the notion that what we accept as normal today (such as marijuana and cocaine being bad and illegal) was not necessarily always the case. I loved this book, although she does tend to run on a bit, and a large portion of the final chapters seemed like filler.

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### **Melissa McCauley says**

"Money Can't Buy Happiness" Um... YES IT CAN. Money can buy a safe place to live, food, clothing, healthcare, security for your family... Money means you can pay for an education and not have to work some soul-killing, back-breaking job that kills you by 40, and you have time to sit around and read a book like this. See? HAPPY

This book points out how much ridiculous bull our society puts out there. You should be ashamed of what you eat, you should be ashamed of how much you weigh, of how you have sex... this drug is good to take, but \*that\* drug with the same effect is bad to take. I'm sure many people will not like this book because it points out the fool's gold in their sacred cows, but I wish we as a society would talk more about these things.

It makes me happy to see the dimply layer of cellulite on my thighs. There. I admitted it. Even so, I feel compelled to justify it because of all the messages I've been fed throughout my life that fat is bad.

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### **Jake says**

After reading *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson* I had high hopes for this and it didn't disappoint. Hecht says that there are different types of happiness: Good Day Happiness which comes from good entertainment or taking a walk or getting a massage, Euphoria can be experienced through great sex or drugs or crowd celebrations, and A Happy Life gained through rewarding relationships, skills mastered, etc... All types of happiness are necessary but gaining one can often cause another to be lacking. I suppose it's all about balance and recognizing what makes you happy at any given time. A very smart book. I love how Jennifer Michael thinks.

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## Adam says

There's a lot in here: Eating, Exercise, Sex and Treatments (e.g., massage...). Much like *Freakonomics*, it means to dispel conventional wisdom. It pursues that goal by not only tossing in a few figures that counter current perceptions, but - more interestingly - it does a good job of putting things in historical context. Basically, today's science is tomorrow's laughably outdated mysticism.

It's good beach reading: thought provoking but not hard to digest. I didn't agree with everything I read, but I'm glad to have read it.

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## Olivia Maia says

gostei mais pelas informações históricas do que pelo conjunto do ensaio (justamente porque me parece que falta unidade). de qualquer forma é interessante por botar algumas noções e ideais de felicidade em perspectiva.

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