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What does it mean to be happy? Americans have had an obsession with "the pursuit of happiness" ever since the Founding Fathers enshrined it along with life and liberty as our national birthright. Whether it means the accumulation of wealth or a more vaguely understood notion of self-fulfillment or self-actualization, happiness has been an inevitable, though elusive, goal.

But it is hard to separate "real" happiness from the banal self-help version that embraces mindless positive thinking. And though we have two booming "happiness industries" religion, with its promise of salvation, and psychopharmacology, with its promise of better living through chemistry each comes with its own problems and complications.

In "Seven Pleasures," Willard Spiegelman takes a look at the possibilities for achieving ordinary secular happiness without recourse to either religion or drugs. In this erudite and frequently hilarious book of essays, he discusses seven activities that lead naturally and easily to a sense of well-being. One of these dancing requires a partner, and therefore provides a lesson in civility, or good citizenship, as one of its benefits. The other six reading, walking, looking, listening, swimming, and writing are things one performs alone. "Seven Pleasures" is a marvelously engaging guide to the pursuit of happiness, and all its accompanying delights."

Seven Pleasures: Essays on Ordinary Happiness Details

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From Reader Review Seven Pleasures: Essays on Ordinary Happiness for online ebook

Tim says

Spiegelman's essays on reading and writing, the beginning and end of the book, are wonderful. The ones in between, while supposedly about personal and accessible topics, became a little more rarified and elite. If you talk about walking and end up focusing on walking in Venice, the rest of us get lost (as he often did in Venice). The seven pleasures were loosely arranged around the idea of happiness, a conceit Spiegelman did not pursue intensely, probably for the best.

Clark says

Loved the Introduction and the first chapter on Reading. After that it was all downhill. I should have put the book down after the first chapter.

Sara says

"Reading -- I am tempted to call it 'the best reading' -- is endangered now not only because our culture has become visual and obsessed with images, but also, and more dangerously, because the culture has become a mass one. The most popular activities are performed in groups -- music, sports, spectacular public entertainment, whereas the best readers are idiosyncratic solitaires. We have too much noise, especially when we least desire it. At the theater, at a concert, or at the movies, people behave as though they are still in their living rooms, sharing opinions that no one else wants to hear, whether loudly or quietly doesn't matter. To sit still in one place, especially in the presence of others, is a dying or at least an endangered custom. So where does this leave poor reading? Sitting alone, in quiet, in one's room: how many have the capacity to do that? Maybe very few ever have; perhaps 'the best reading' has always been the professor's chimerical dream" (53).

Charlene says

I read this book over the course of several weeks -- finishing one essay and then waiting a while before reading the next. I think the book is best appreciated that way. Author's seven pleasures are reading, walking, looking, dancing, listening, swimming, writing and then there's a short personal introductory essay on "being". Author is a literature professor & writer and while the book is no means a memoir, it is a personal reflection on these things that have brought him pleasure throughout his life. Not sure if I say the first essay, on reading, is best because it truly is or because it interested me the most. I've read it twice already and will probably read it again.

C says

In a word, boring.

Lynne Marie says

I picked up this book on a whim because I enjoy memoirs and books about happiness. The problem with it is sometimes it is hard to relate to this guy. The whole premise of the book is that he discusses seven simple things that bring him happiness (walking, reading, listening, etc), but his examples aren't simple or even recreatable. He talks about the joy in walking and observing people, which is very enjoyable, but the entire section is about him traveling abroad just to walk in another country or traveling to NYC just to view an art show. I know I can't do that!

There are some real gems that I think I will put into my everyday life though.

Sarah Yasin says

This book is pretentious, dry and even anti-intellectual. The author is self-absorbed and too blinded by narcissism to know that reading and writing and being part of the human condition means that we should interact with other people. He actually pooh-poohs the idea of reading clubs.

This book reads like ramblings that only a vanity press would publish.

In the final part the author says he finds writing to be effortless. A good writer exerts some effort, so ipso facto we have in *Seven Pleasures* a specimen of bad writing.

Bruce says

“The fox-trot has no *raison d’être*. There is no reason to dance at all except one - pleasure - and the greatest pleasure is calculated uselessness.” Thus Willard Spiegelman begins a charming little book that I enjoyed immensely.

Spiegelman, professor of English at Southern Methodist University, writes in an easy and conversational style, rejecting happiness based on religion or psychopharmacology, on the one hand, or the typical American happiness focused on instant gratification and wealth, on the other. Instead, his ideas of happiness or “sanguinity” are akin to the *eudaimonia* of Aristotle, to human flourishing, and like Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Spiegelman’s happiness is of the mundane variety, a thoroughly secular phenomenon. Granted that he does not attempt to distinguish happiness from pleasure with any philosophic rigor. Nonetheless, urbane, witty, and gentle, he makes his points without bludgeoning the reader, inviting a mutual exploration of simple pleasures that can contribute to happiness. Like dancing the fox-trot.

First, reading. Like five of the other six activities Spiegelman discusses, this one is solitary, not a necessary

condition for happiness by any means, but a frequent one to his mind. In this part-memoir, part philosophical musing, he writes, “We read in part to lose ourselves and thereby to find ourselves; from self-loss comes self-construction.” Reading, leisurely reading, self-directed reading, solitary reading, is its own reward.

And then, walking. By walking he means strolling, purposeless and without destination. Although he prefers urban walking, he has nothing against rural strolling, the point being aimless wandering, varying pace and destination as the spirit moves him. He uses Venice as a paradigmatic venue for strolling, but the principles he articulates, if anything so non-directed can have principles, apply anywhere.

Next, looking. Encouraging us to look rather than simply see, observe instead of just noticing, he generalizes to all of life as he uses the visual arts, especially painting, as his model. Spiegelman argues for art museums with chairs, for spending extended periods of time with one work of art, for approaching the looking experience with an empty mind, receptively, contemplatively, without verbal explanations, responding intuitively and personally to what we confront. It is a helpful lesson.

The keystone of his organizational scheme comes next: dancing. Spiegelman writes, “I had never thought that in middle age I would begin to learn something new, especially something physical. I had never thought that an obsession would be both so harmless and so easy to come by, immediate in its intensity and long-lasting in its pleasure. I had never thought that a single activity would begin in the body and extend through the mind and to the spirit. I had never thought that I could so easily be transported. And I had never fully appreciated, or applied to my own life, the truth of Willa Cather’s observation in *My Antonia*, subsequently carved onto her tombstone in Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire: ‘This is happiness; to be dissolved in something complete and great.’ In other words, I had never thought that I would become a dancer.” Spiegelman speaks for me. He makes the point that the pleasure in dancing derives in part from the immersion in an activity that takes us out of our usual self-awareness: “How can we distinguish cause and effect; how can we know the dancer from the motivation for the dance?” And, quoting psychologist Havelock Ellis: “Dance is the loftiest, the most moving, the most beautiful of the arts, because it is no mere translation or abstraction from life; it is life itself.” In fact, in dance we lose ourselves.

Moving on, Spiegelman explores listening (notice that all his activities are gerunds). Although in this chapter he primarily focuses on listening to music, he begins with an exploration of silence, of listening to silence, of the healing role of silence in our lives. A staunch opponent of background or “elevator” music, he discusses the nature and role of music, the unique attributes of listening to language-less art (although he also clearly loves opera). Above all, really listening to music requires single-minded concentration, immersion in sound and open receptivity to the emotional content and to our own responses.

And then, unlikely as it may seem, he moves to swimming. Spiegelman uses swimming to reflect on the relationships between the narrowing of sensory focus and the expansion of internal awareness, between physical exhilaration and the demands of discipline, between an activity for one’s own personal satisfaction and for competition. And our own solitary enjoyment of an activity may expand to include the desire to improve, to do more, to move deeper into that which fully engages one’s attention and satisfaction.

And seventh, writing. In this chapter, and only here, I felt a bit let down. In all the previous sections, with all the previous activities (“pleasures”), I felt that what he advocates was accessible to me, the common chap, an ordinary person. Here, though, he focuses almost exclusively on the published writer, the trials and gratifications of the author who writes for an audience and is able to present that writing to such an audience. Yet for how few of us can that ever be true. I would have discussed the joys of writing for oneself, even if in the back of one’s mind is the hope that someday, somehow, someone will read and appreciate what one has written. Writing is a pleasure. Writing is a joy. But for most of us writing happens in a journal, in letters or

emails, in the little poems we modestly write and never send to anyone. And that writing can be its own reward. To say nothing of the fact, in a circular way that returns to Spiegelman's first chapter, that writing leads us to be better and more appreciative readers.

At the very end, in "Acknowledgements", Spiegelman adds an eighth activity, one that he describes as being most fundamental of all to happiness - just sitting. Pascal once said, "All mankind's troubles are caused by one single thing, which is their inability to sit quietly in a room." This work is a wise and companionable book by a wise and companionable author, one not to be missed.

Matthew says

Typical Spiegelman--engaging, thoughtful, never a word wasted. He dazzles with his entertaining wit. This book doesn't disappoint.

Seven Pleasures turns the American obsession with the pursuit of happiness inside out. Rather than focus on religion or pharmacology, Spiegelman advocates thoughtful activity and engagement with the world. The book is a collection of essays each titled with a gerund: Reading, Walking, Looking, Dancing, Listening, Swimming and Writing--all, with the exception of dancing, solitary pursuits. The seven essays, in the words of Spiegelman, "explore activities that come from and lead to `ordinary happiness.'" It's not a memoir, but it is deeply personal. Read this and you'll not only fall in love with Spiegelman, but with life again.

Jay says

"None of the arts, however, makes you a better person, and nothing should promote the belief that anyone else has an interest in another person's pictures, songs, or poems, just as no one is interested in other people's travel photos, dogs, or children. One engages in the activity to please oneself, and if others want to overhear or to read it, so much the better."

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

I always make a mental list of books I might want to buy when I go to the Texas Book Festival each year. This book was on my list. Then I heard the author speak and I reconsidered: No, a library choice, I decided.

I was right. The author is an erudite man, a professor, and this book reeks of his desire to share what he knows with others. I'm quite certain there are many who would love to read of his encounters with his seven pleasures, and perhaps, given the right mindset, I would have enjoyed these, but the truth is that I did not. I had to force myself to keep reading what came across to me as mostly autobiographic tidbits and slices from lectures.

Just so you know, the seven pleasures are reading, walking, looking, dancing, listening, swimming and writing. He got that much right.

Gloria says

There are "a million" books available about happiness and its pursuit. The subtitle of "Essays on Ordinary Happiness" is one of the minor flaws I would say exists simply because it adds this wonderful book to the happiness category of books.

While somewhat intellectual and academic in tone, this book is nevertheless warm and appealing. Some of the words and references to art and travel are less familiar, but most readers will be fine. Easy to read just one essay at a time; you can come back days later and just take off again with the next one.

All of these essay topics are activities I do, and while there were no great revelations, it gives one pause and invites you to a new paradigm about the subject. Will appeal a great deal to those who enjoy reflective/philosophical reading.

Sara says

I had such high hopes for this collection of essays because I do the chapter headings: swimming, reading, writing. Although the author is quite companionable and interesting, I wanted more. I wanted him to abandon his academic persona and take some risks, some imaginative leaps. I wanted at least one epiphany. Instead, I was entertained and informed. Still, it was enjoyable.

Allison says

Thank god I am finished with this hideous book. *Seven Pleasures* is particularly frustrating because this book of personal essays wouldn't have to be such an excruciating experience--Spiegelman can write, there's no doubt about that--if it weren't completely undone by the fact that it's written by one of the most pretentious, self-involved writers I have ever read. This is not a book about pleasure, and it's not a book about art or leisure. It's a book about Willard Spiegelman, and Willard Spiegelman successfully portrays himself as every stereotype of the erudite, wildly privileged, and completely insufferable English professor (and I have known and liked many insufferable English professors). He can't seem to help continually congratulating himself on being smarter and better than everyone else in the room. What starts as a chapter on music and its effect on the listener soon morphs into an opera critique and Spiegelman's boast that the first albums he purchased as a teenager were "Guionir Novaes playing the first book of Debussy's *Preludes* and Szymon Goldberg doing the Brandenburg Concertos." He can't resist telling the reader that he knows Ancient Greek . . . in a chapter about swimming. He often lapses into Latin and French without any translations or footnotes, and one gets the impression that he does so intentionally to weed out unworthy readers; as you read, you can practically hear him at his typewriter muttering about "uncultured plebeian mouth-breathers." Now, let me be clear: a writer can be cultured and well-educated and privileged without being thoroughly unenjoyable . . . but that writer is not Willard Spiegelman.

TL;DR: if this book were a car, it would be an Aston Martin with those tacky giant dangling truck balls.

Michael McCormick says

Wonderful to read; it drove home for me, especially in the last few pages, that wanting to be great is an indicator of becoming great. Additionally, I found insights on every page of what makes the seven pleasures so pleasurable, and therefore so important. This is a healing book: It brought me back to when I was younger and really loved to dance. Now, I am making it an area of focus in my life again, to enjoy these seven pleasures, and especially to take dance lessons so to be ready for Mid-Summers Night Swing at Lincoln Center. This book should be required reading for every Catholic worldwide who is taken in by the idea that this life is for suffering so that we may have salvation in the next. Bullshit! The fact is that Mary, the mother of God, probably did NOT remain a virgin her whole life. So get off your sorry asses and read this book!
