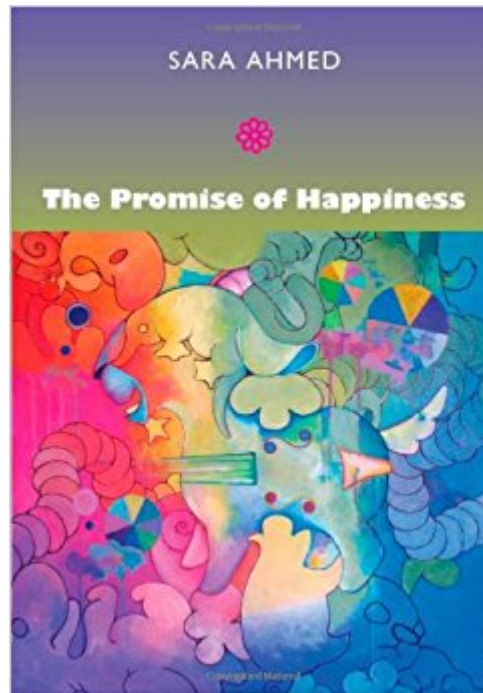




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# The Promise Of Happiness



## Synopsis

The Promise of Happiness is a provocative cultural critique of the imperative to be happy. It asks what follows when we make our desires and even our own happiness conditional on the happiness of others: “I just want you to be happy”; “I’m happy if you’re happy.” Combining philosophy and feminist cultural studies, Sara Ahmed reveals the affective and moral work performed by the “happiness duty,” the expectation that we will be made happy by taking part in that which is deemed good, and that by being happy ourselves, we will make others happy. Ahmed maintains that happiness is a promise that directs us toward certain life choices and away from others. Happiness is promised to those willing to live their lives in the right way. Ahmed draws on the intellectual history of happiness, from classical accounts of ethics as the good life, through seventeenth-century writings on affect and the passions, eighteenth-century debates on virtue and education, and nineteenth-century utilitarianism. She engages with feminist, antiracist, and queer critics who have shown how happiness is used to justify social oppression, and how challenging oppression causes unhappiness. Reading novels and films including *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Well of Loneliness*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, and *Children of Men*, Ahmed considers the plight of the figures who challenge and are challenged by the attribution of happiness to particular objects or social ideals: the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer, the angry black woman, and the melancholic migrant. Through her readings she raises critical questions about the moral order imposed by the injunction to be happy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Ahmed’s analyses are spot-on and provocative. . . . Ahmed’s analysis of this and other topics is unpredictable and engaging.” - Heather Seggel, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*

“Ahmed’s language is a joy, and her work on each case study is filled with insight and rigor as she doggedly traces the social networks of dominance concealed and congealed around happiness. . . . The *Promise of Happiness* is an important intervention in affect studies that crucially approaches one of the major assumptions guiding social life: the assumption that we need to be happy.” - Sean Grattan, *Social Text*

“... [F]ascinating and important, both in showing us how to read some keytexts differently and in showing how to think more carefully about happiness and its politics. . . . [T]here is a perverse happiness to be taken from readings such an interesting book about the insufficiency of happiness.” - Richard Ashcroft, *Textual Practice*

“The *Promise of Happiness* bridges philosophy and cultural studies, phenomenology and feminist thought • providing a fresh and incisive approach to some of the most urgent contemporary feminist issues. Ahmed navigates this bridge with a voice both clear and warm to convey ideas that are as complex as they are intimate and accessible. Her treatment of affect as a phenomenological project provides feminist theorists a way out of mind-body divides without reverting to essentialisms, enabling Ahmed to attend to intersectional and global power relations with acuity and originality.” - Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Signs*

“The *Promise of Happiness* is richly valuable not only for its discussion of utilitarianism but also for its broader deconstruction of the workings of happiness in a range of works of philosophy, literature, and social science. Whereas other feminist theorists also occasionally cast a critical eye toward happiness, or raise consciousness of female unhappiness, Ahmed has produced a volume that is unparalleled in its sustained and extensive expose of the entanglements between discourses of happiness and oppression.” - Andrea Veltman, *Hypatia*

“Ahmed enhances feminism’s critical toolbox by guiding us to regard affect as a cipher for society as we track how it produces and is produced by politics. ... Ahmed draws on feminism to potentially enhance the quality of life for her readers, who are offered mindful practices of relinquishing attachment to various ideals in a text that is neither Pollyannaish nor depressing.” - Naomi Greyser, *Feminist Studies*

“At a time when happiness studies are all the rage and feminism is accused of destroying women’s happiness, Sara Ahmed offers a bold critique of the consensus that happiness is an unconditional good. Her new book asks searching questions about the nature of the good life, making its case in a wonderfully pellucid prose. What a paradox that a defense of the kill-joy should be such a pleasure to read! This timely, original, and intellectually expansive book is sure to trigger a great deal of debate.” - Rita Felski, *University of Virginia*

“What could be

more naturalized and less subject to ideological critique than happiness? How are we to get critical perspective on it? Through her readings of texts and films, Sara Ahmed shows how this might work. By revealing the complexity and ambivalence of happiness, she intervenes in several fields—including queer and feminist theory, affect studies, and critical race theory—in a genuinely new and exciting way.

Heather K. Love, author of *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. . . [F]ascinating and important, both in showing us how to read some key texts differently and in showing how to think more carefully about happiness and its politics. . . . [T]here is a perverse happiness to be taken from readings such an interesting book about the insufficiency of happiness.

(Richard Ashcroft *Textual Practice*)

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An unsettling but also surprisingly comforting book about how happiness is used as a disciplinary strategy in modern western society. Ahmed writes beautifully and incorporates literary and film analysis into her cultural critique seamlessly. I often skip long sections of textual analysis if I haven't read/seen the work being critiqued, but I was able to read through all of Ahmed because of her skillful descriptions and the perfect way she handles incorporating them into her points.

Ahmed thoroughly explores happiness - it's meanings and applications. Rare in scholarly work, her writing is Both informative and beautiful.

A little professorial, but I guess that was the intent.

Such a brilliant critic!!

Was purchased as a gift and was as expected.

Excellent book for anyone interested in affect theory! Ahmed offers a genealogy of happiness that interrogates the common injunction to "be happy."

Had to read this book for a class. It was an excruciating read. While there are some really good nuggets in here, it's just too dense and scholarly of a read to read for pleasure. The book is very thoroughly researched, though. If you enjoy reading theory or philosophy, you'll probably get a lot out of this book.

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