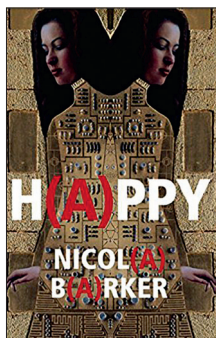


H(A)PPY

Nicola Barker

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A PERFECT WORLD

Mira A is one of The Young, a privileged member of the System, in which everything is in balance and perfect harmony, and where there is no want, desire, or doubt. She perceives the world through her Sensor, aided by means of implanted neuro-mechanical Oracular Devices; adjustments can also be made to her chemical balances.

Mira A tells us that she is H(A)PPY — but she is puzzled by the parentheses around the letter A. This is the first indication that things aren't quite as perfect as they are supposed to be.

For Mira A (like the twin star after which she is named) experiences oscillations. She also develops an inexplicable fascination for the 19th-century Paraguayan guitarist Agustín Barrios. Before long, her Information Stream begins to feed her a vast amount of items about Paraguay, its languages, culture, and history, and about Barrios himself. She has increasingly bizarre dreams (are they dreams?), and finds herself subject to EOE (Excesses of Emotion), which threaten not only her balance but also that of the community of The Young to which she belongs.

Her state of mind becomes increasingly unstable, the narrative she relates increasingly labyrinthine, and the representatives of the System increasingly worried. Will she be thrown out and sent to live in The Unknown, a place where remnants of The Past live on with all their human emotions, conflicts, competing beliefs, and imperfections? Where:

'Life is death, faith is war, words are fluid, freedom kills certainty, and narrative pervades every tiny chink and crack and orifice and poisons everything.'

Is your interest piqued? If it is, then you may well enjoy this extraordinary work of fiction, whose exploration of thought

control, utopianism/dystopianism, creativity, and (why not?) the human soul is told in a dazzle of verbal fireworks, its presentation enlivened by varying fonts and colours, mysterious symbols, and elliptical illustrations.

There may be shades of Huxley and Orwell, Atwood and Lessing lurking in the background, but Nicola Barker is way out on a limb here, a true original, attuned to the digital age.

Incidentally, I did try her suggestion of listening to the recorded works of Agustín Barrios while reading the book: it's beautiful music, but I'm not sure it helped.

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H(A)PPY was the winner of the Goldsmiths Prize 2017 and has been longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2018.

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