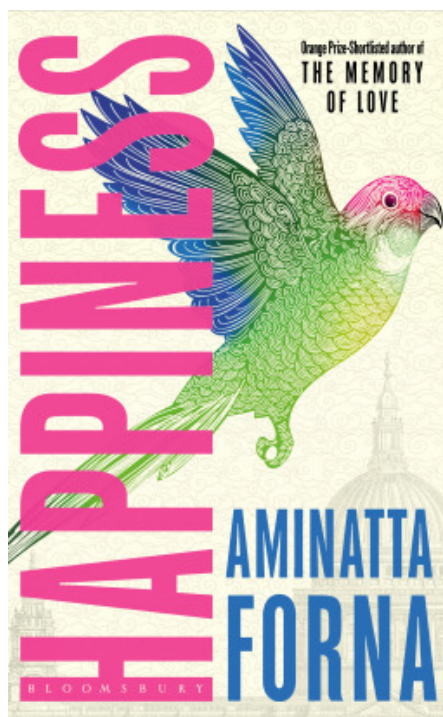




Happiness

Aminatta Forna

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"Not since *Remains of the Day* has an author so skillfully revealed the way history's layers are often invisible to all but its participants . . . Gorgeous." --John Freeman, *Boston Globe* on *The Hired Man*

London. A fox makes its way across Waterloo Bridge. The distraction causes two pedestrians to collide--Jean, an American studying the habits of urban foxes, and Attila, a Ghanaian psychiatrist there to deliver a keynote speech. From this chance encounter, Aminatta Forna's unerring powers of observation show how in the midst of the rush of a great city lie numerous moments of connection.

Attila has arrived in London with two tasks: to deliver a keynote speech on trauma, as he has done many times before; and to contact the daughter of friends, his "niece" who hasn't called home in a while. Ama has been swept up in an immigration crackdown, and now her young son Tano is missing.

When, by chance, Attila runs into Jean again, she mobilizes the network of rubbish men she uses as volunteer fox spotters. Security guards, hotel doormen, traffic wardens--mainly West African immigrants who work the myriad streets of London--come together to help. As the search for Tano continues, a deepening friendship between Attila and Jean unfolds.

Meanwhile a consulting case causes Attila to question the impact of his own ideas on trauma, the values of the society he finds himself in, and a grief of his own. In this delicate tale of love and loss, of cruelty and kindness, Forna asks us to consider the interconnectedness of lives, our co-existence with one another and all living creatures, and the true nature of happiness.

Happiness Details

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Author : Aminatta Forna

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From Reader Review Happiness for online ebook

•Karen• says

An ambitious novel, magnificently executed. I have no idea why I had not heard of Ms Forna before. A joyful moment: discovering an author whose work you appreciate and then finding there's lots more.

Love is a gamble, the stake is the human heart. The lover holds his or her cards close, lays them out one at a time and watches each move of the other player. To whom do you go first? This is the 'tell' of love. When a thing happens, be it good or bad, when you pick up the telephone or push through a crowd, who is it you most want to reach?

Rachel says

I'm so conflicted about Happiness. I think there's a really extraordinary novel in here - I just think it occasionally gets too caught up in its meandering structure, and loses focus too often. At its best, it's striking and thought-provoking; at its worst, it's a slog.

Happiness is a quiet, contemplative novel that meditates on themes like trauma, cultural differences, the relationship between humans and animals, and what it means to be happy. The novel begins with a chance encounter between two expats in London, an American woman named Jean and a Ghanaian man named Attila. It takes place over the course of about a week (though it feels much longer), and it follows each of their narratives as they weave in and out of each other's lives.

I've seen this compared to Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, but it actually reminds me more of *The Unconsoled*. Not the whole Kafkaesque element, but one thing that struck me was how Jean and Attila kept encountering minor characters, getting caught up in their drama, and getting derailed from their main story - reminiscent of Ishiguro's character Ryder (not to mention that Attila and Ryder are both meant to be preparing for exhibitions of sorts - a psychology lecture for one and a piano recital for the other). But anyway, these proverbial rabbit holes that they go down feel less like subplots than they do side-quests, and as a reader I couldn't help but to go through Happiness with a touch of impatience, waiting for the narrative to regain focus. This not-quite-linear structure is deliberate, but it didn't completely work for me.

I thought Forna's prose was really excellent, and I highlighted so many passages on my Kindle that I found striking. But I also couldn't wait to be done with this after a while. While it's certainly a unique novel that has a lot to offer, I just wish it had been subjected to more rigorous editing. Maybe that's just a personal preference, though. Recommended if you're in the mood for something thoughtful and character-driven, that ultimately examines the role of trauma in shaping our lives.

Thank you to Netgalley, Atlantic Monthly Press, and Aminatta Forna for the advanced copy provided in exchange for an honest review.

Michelle says

3.5 stars

Happiness is a slow burn that took a while to get into at first. Yet there is so much depth to this book that one

cannot easily dismiss it. Flashbacks and long ago histories are used to show that coincidence does not exist. Instead Forna chooses to highlight the inter-relatedness of humans to one another and to our environment. In this way Happiness is a love story. One that is honest and tenderly develops over time. Early on we are introduced to Jean, a wildlife biologist studying canids in urban areas and Attila, a psychologist who travels to war torn countries and examines the impact of trauma. Their relationship lies in the background of what defines Happiness. Through the voice of Attila, Forna examines our ideas of happiness. In Western society this notion of contentment is more about the belief that we are owed pleasure. This theory assumes that we come into the world happy and as long as hardship doesn't knock on our door we remain blissful and at peace. But life does not work this way. Change is inevitable. Our need to control everything exposes our vulnerabilities and causes us to act out in fear. Holding ourselves to the opinion that trauma brings about grief and changes us for the worse only brings about despair. Instead struggle and change should be viewed as necessary for personal growth and instilling an appreciation for what we have been given. This is true happiness.

PattyMacDotComma says

4★

“Fast food. Fried chicken, burgers, kebabs – the sidewalks have turned into an “all you can eat” buffet for foxes. The same is true in cities the world over.”

Jean has a small grant to study urban foxes in London and supplements it with money earned from “wilding” people’s urban domains, planting vegetable and wildflower gardens on balconies and rooftops. Her business card reads **“Jean Turane. Wild Spaces.”**

She’s a divorced American with an ex-husband, Ray, a perfectly decent fellow who absolutely loves the cars he sells and the life he’s chosen in a small town. Jean, on the other hand, is an outdoor girl who goes for runs through the woods and puts radio-collars on coyotes. He does go along to help and tries to sound interested, but isn’t completely convincing.

“Ray felt he could not compete with her work. If she had run her own nail salon probably they would still be together.”

That’s the life a lot of her old schoolmates chose, but she’s enjoying her solitude in London, where she watches foxes clamber along walls, across bridges, through alleys, making dens under shipping containers. Some are chased away, some are fed by people working in the kitchens of the Savoy.

Crossing Waterloo Bridge one day, she literally bumps into Attila Asare, an enormous, very black African psychiatrist who is in London as the keynote speaker at a psychiatry conference. They mumble apologies and go on their way. They cross paths again, of course, and the connection of their stories is the basis for the novel.

Forna is a fine writer and she obviously has a lot to say about urbanisation of wildlife, conservation, politics, wars and war zones, migrants, psychology - anything I’ve left out?

Jean is a bit of an idealistic tree-hugger, Attila is a realistic, practical psychiatrist, and when they are suddenly presented with a young boy who needs looking after, they gather some of the African community around them and pitch in.

There’s a bit too much going on, but basically I enjoyed it. I was reminded of Trevor Noah’s autobiography,

Born a Crime: Stories From a South African Childhood, when Attila was asked about his name.

‘Your parents named you after Attila the Hun?’

Attila smiled. ‘Some people,’ he said, ‘name their baby girls Victoria.’

Noah said many Africans had only heard famous names and decided to name their kids for someone famous, and one kid he grew up with was called Hitler. As Noah said, the parents would have had no idea Hitler was bad, just that it was a name they’d heard a lot. [I shared a lot of his information about this in my review of his book: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show....>]

There are many side stories, mostly Attila’s I think, since he’s got the colourful background, working around the world as he has with troops and people suffering from PTSD. He is continually asked to be an expert witness in stress and trauma cases, but he prefers not to testify, since there’s too much at stake now financially, not medically.

“It’s a hot topic and it’s only getting hotter. The military take it a great deal more seriously these days. Then there’s the insurance companies, certain employers. There’s a lot of work for expert witnesses now.”

He’s an expert, all right, but he understands that not all reactions to grief and tragedy are necessarily PTSD. So there is quite a discussion about what does constitute PTSD as opposed to normal reactions to loss or horror, and if I need a psychiatrist, I’d like Attila to be mine, please.

He has suffered his own trauma and losses, and the stories cut back and forth a bit to his work in war zones, facing checkpoints and his unwinding with an iPod playing something like a Congolese rumba, which gets him dancing with abandon in his hotel room. Seems to suit him.

Jean’s stories tend to get preachy about cutting down trees, killing foxes and coyotes, eating vegan, running through the cemetery to be alone. A bit of a killjoy, but gradually we see her warm up with the influence of the migrant community, Attila and the boy.

A good read, if a bit disjointed, and I loved Attila. Thanks to NetGalley and the publishers for the review copy from which I’ve quoted, so quotes may have changed.

Hannah says

I was sure I would adore this book - and I enjoyed plenty of it, but parts left me bored and slightly confused. This is a story of chance and coincidence, of strangers meeting and lives slowly changing - and I loved that aspect of it. But it is also a book about animals in urban places - and that I was not so keen on.

Aminatta Forna tells her story slowly and considerately. I had the impression that every word, every sentence was placed very thoughtfully and carefully. While I can appreciate her craft, I also found it lifeless. Her prose was just not quite sharp enough for me to excuse the rambling nature of her narrative. While it is certainly accomplished, for me something was lacking. And I cannot quite put my fingers on what exactly the missing ingredient was - but as it is found the overall book less compelling than its many parts.

Part of that has to do with the fact that I found her two protagonists, Attila the psychologist and Jean the biologist, more compelling when they weren't interacting with each other. I thought Jean's struggle as a researcher who is missing her son was compelling and interesting (and very close to my heart); Attila's

restlessness and his interesting profession as somebody working with trauma was another highpoint for me - but for some reason I did not find them believable together and I thought their interactions did not ring true to what their characters were on their own (this might very well have been on purpose, I know, showing that they bring out the best in each other but it didn't really work for me).

There were definite glimpses of brilliance here though. Jean's interactions with her extended network of rubbish men and security and everybody else walking the streets were wonderful and lovely and absolutely felt true. Her conversations with her son were painful to read but poignant. Attila's love for his wife was wonderfully drawn and the juxtaposition with his restlessness was incredibly well done. But this brilliance was not quite enough for me to off-set the pages and pages of musings on coyotes and foxes and their changing habitats; a topic that I am very much not interested in at all and that Forna did not manage to make interesting.

I received an ARC of this book courtesy of NetGalley and Bloomsbury Publishing in exchange for an honest review.

You can find this review and other thoughts on books on my blog.

Claire McAlpine says

Wolf, coyote, fox, human
Trauma, suffering, damage
Happiness, hope

Jean, Attila, London

Doormen, Security men, Street cleaners, A man painted silver

A Study into the urban fox
A keynote conference speech on trauma

Ghana, America

war zones, negotiations, danger,
a hatred of nature, that which man can not control or profit from
loved ones lost

Rosie, Emmanuel
Ama, Tano
Maryse

Happiness opens with the tale of a wolf hunter in the US called in to track a wolf that is believed to have been killing sheep. He observes the surroundings, lies in wait, makes the kill, collects his bounty and then returns to lie in wait for the she-wolf he knows will come out after three days. Two species. Surviving.

London. A fox makes its way across Waterloo Bridge. The distraction causes two pedestrians to collide—Jean, an American studying the habits of urban foxes, and Attila, a Ghanaian psychiatrist there to deliver a keynote speech.

Attila has just been to the theatre, he has arrived a few days early to indulge his passion for theatre and to look up his niece Ama, whom the family hasn't heard from recently, he will also see an old friend and former colleague Rosie, who has premature Alzheimers.

While we follow Attila on his rounds of visiting his friends and family, all of whom are in need of his aide, we witness flashbacks into his working life, his brief encounters in numerous war zones, where he was sent on missions to negotiate with hardline individuals often operating outside the law. He remembers his wife Maryse, there is deep sense of remorse.

His niece Ama and her 10 year old son Tano have been forcibly evicted from their apartment in an immigration crackdown, she is unable to resolve the matter, hospitalised due to an unstable diabetic condition. Attila responds with the help of the doorman of his hotel, who alerts other hotel doormen, to be on the lookout for Tano who has disappeared amidst all the confusion.

And there is Jean, in London to study the behaviour of the urban fox, she has funding for a period of time to observe them, their numbers, how they have come to be living in the city and whether they expose a risk to the humans they live alongside. She recruited a local street-cleaner and through him others, to be her field study fox spotters, the few people likely to regularly see them.

'Everything happens for a reason, that was Jean's view, and part of her job was tracing those chains of cause and effect, mapping the interconnectedness of things.'

These networks of connected men, the doormen, the streetcleaners and others, come together to help Jean and Attila in their search for Tano. They've texted his picture to each other, they know who to look for. They demonstrate something important, in their resilience and ability to adapt to this new environment, creating new support circles, many having been through traumatic experiences before finding a semblance of new life in London.

'Let me do the same for you,' said the doorman. 'The doormen and security people, they are my friends. Most of those boys who work in security are Nigerian. We Ghanaians, we prefer the hospitality industry. Many of the doormen at these hotels you see around here are our countrymen. The street-sweepers, the traffic wardens are mainly boys from Sierra Leone, they came here after their war so for them the work is okay.'

Jean too remembers what she has left, in America, where she tried to do a similar study on the coyote, an animal that due to the human impact on the environment had left the prairie and moved towards more urban environment.

Finding herself in conflict with locals, who campaigned against the coyote, believing it to be a danger to humans, her voice silenced by those who preferred to extend hunting licences, despite her warnings that culling the coyote would result in their population multiplying not decreasing.

Now a similar debate arises in London, where the Mayor wants to cull the animals and Jean's message, based on scientific evidence is being ignored, worse it attracts the attention of internet trolls, flaming the unsubstantiated fears of residents.

Ultimately the novel is about how we all adapt, humans and wild animals alike, to changing circumstances, to trauma, to the environment; that we can overcome the trauma, however we need to be aware of those who have adapted long before us, who will resist the newcomer, the propaganda within a political message.

And to the possibility that the experience of trauma doesn't have to equate to continual suffering, that our narrative does not have to be that which happened in the past, it is possible to change, to move on, to find community in another place, to rebuild, to have hope. And that is perhaps what happiness really is, a space where hope can grow, might exist, not the fulfilment of, but the idea, the expression.

Salman Rushdie alludes to this after the fatwa was issued against him when he said this:

“Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.”

In an enlightening article in The Guardian, linked below, Forna describes reading Resilience, by renowned psychologist Boris Cyrulnik. Born in France in 1937, his parents were sent to concentration camps in WW2 and never returned. He survived, but his story often wasn't believed, it didn't fit the narrative of the time. He studied medicine and became a specialist in resilience.

“It's not so much that I have new ideas,” he says, at pains to acknowledge his debt to other psychoanalytic thinkers, “but I do offer a new attitude. Resilience is about abandoning the imprint of the past.”

The most important thing to note about his work, he says, is that resilience is not a character trait: people are not born more, or less, resilient than others. As he writes: “Resilience is a mesh, not a substance. We are forced to knit ourselves, using the people and things we meet in our emotional and social environments.

Further Reading:

Article: Escape from the past: Boris Cyrulnik lost his mother and father in the Holocaust. But childhood trauma needn't be a burden, he argues – it can be the making of us. by Viv Groskop Apr 2009

Lark Benobi says

What a wonderful story. The ending gave me exactly the feeling of that scene in a film where the hero has made a great sacrifice, and now must die alone, as snow is falling. To carry my filmic metaphor to ridiculous lengths I'll add that the whole book feels like an old film that was shot on nitrate-based material, and it has been not well cared for, or properly stored, so there are many scenes that should be there, but the frames have dulled over, or blooms of sepia have obscured a critical scene, one that might have connected one part of the story to the next part. As it is I frequently could not understand the movement and logic of the story. It felt like the pieces of many stories. This is not always a bad thing.

Diane S ? says

A Quiet and contemplative novel which begins with a chance meeting on the Waterloo bridge brings together two people, both emotionally wounded. Two people, Jean a woman who studies animals in urban

areas and Attila, who is an expert in PTSD in refugees. An unusual friendship will develop between the two, and maybe a hope for more. Although their studies differ in theory, in essence they are both studying the behavior of those, whether animal or human, who were forced out of their natural environment. Trying to adapt to a new environment, often facing hostility.

This is a book i should have loved, but didnt, though I did admire the prose and the subjects. I even liked the characters, though my favorites were the doormen who came from various Africa countries. They added a compassionate element that I liked. I'm not sure why this missed the mark for me, whether it was my mood or that I found the plot meandering, but I found myself putting it down and not in a big hurry to pick it back up. I did like the last third more, which is why I rated this the way I did.

ARC from Netgalley.

Emma says

A very thought provoking book. Is there such a thing as normal? In the West we are sanitised from death to a large extent- bereavement and loss can be all consuming. But in other war torn parts of the world, death can be an everyday part of life. Does trauma necessarily mean that we are damaged? Or does it mean that we are only changed?

“The trouble with happiness, thought Attila, was that, perhaps because infants seemed such happy creatures, people were led to believe that happiness came with a mother’s milk, happiness was man’s state of nature, of which all else was a warping. The search to return to that state became unending. But they were mistaken, for what they desired so badly wasn’t happiness but a state of prelapsarian innocence, the thing that babies possessed. They wanted desperately not to know the truth.”

This story is also about the interconnectedness of life- not only human but animal and plant life too. And how strange that in the modern western urban world, where wildlife is controlled, people still yearn for that connection to the wild, to nature.

This was a wonderful exploration of the meaning of life, love, loss and what happiness might actually mean in real terms.

I have not read any of this author’s previous work but I intend to in the future.

Many thanks to Netgalley for an ARC of this book. All opinions are my own.

Fran says

A chance encounter on Waterloo Bridge, London. Theatregoers, en masse, stream out into a sleety night. Heavy foot traffic on Waterloo Bridge startles a fox. Two pedestrians crash with the woman falling to the ground. The gentleman helps her up.

Dr. Attila Asare, a psychiatrist from Ghana, has traveled to London to deliver a keynote speech at a psychiatry conference. For years, Attila has worked in war zones, specializing in trauma experienced by survivors. He is a big man with a hearty appetite. When eating out, he enjoys being seated near the kitchen in order to view the epicurean creations carried by waiters to the dining clientele.

Jean Turane, an American, is a wildlife biologist working on a two year independent study of urban foxes. Jean, a runner, tracks the movement of foxes who are nocturnal, solitary animals. She gets an assist from some West African immigrants who have volunteered as fox spotters.

Attila's visit to London is multi-faceted. He is asked to check on his "niece" Ama who has not been reachable by phone. A visit to her apartment is unsettling. A neighbor informs Attila that immigration came two days ago. Ama is located in hospital being treated for diabetes but her son Tano, ten years old, is missing.

"Happiness" by Aminatta Forna is a very rich, multi-layered novel. Both Attila and Jean seem to have fulfilling careers but are alone, having experienced loss of love. They carry on, ministering to others. Attila works with trauma victims, Jean with the fox population, recording their movements, trying to promote urban co-existence between humans and foxes. There are factions opposing Jean's work. Lack of knowledge and panic are the driving forces. Attila and Jean cross paths, on occasion. Is this for a reason or a season?

For this reader, "Happiness" was a most enjoyable and informative book. The behavior and habitats of wolves, coyotes and foxes was presented. The character development was excellent as well. This is a tome I highly recommend.

Thank you Grove Atlantic and Net Galley for the opportunity to read and review "Happiness".

Neil says

You could accuse Forna of over-reliance on "coincidence" to drive her plot forward. But one of her characters attempts to cover that off for us:

"So ... you say it is a coincidence we have met three times. What if I tell you I don't believe in coincidences? ... But what we call coincidences are merely normal events of low probability."

Fundamentally, her character is explaining that if you join the dots leading up to an event, you will see that what might look like a random meeting is, in fact, almost inevitable. You might think it unlikely that two strangers would meet three times in one of the world's busiest cities (London), but when you learn about what brings them to London, it becomes less surprising that they should, in this case literally, run into one another.

Attila is a Ghanaian psychiatrist in London to give a keynote speech at a conference on his specialist topic - post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Jean is a scientist in London to study urban foxes. They first meet when Jean is out for a run in the city and accidentally collides with Attila. They dust themselves off and go their separate ways. But a connection has been made and grows from there.

Both our main protagonists have a lot going on in their lives. I had to stop at one point and write down all the different story threads so that I could try to keep track of them. Attila is in London for professional reasons (the conference), but also personal: he is trying to contact Ama, the daughter of friends, who has dropped out of contact. Whilst preparing for his conference and searching for Ama, he is also visiting Rosie, an ex-colleague now in a nursing home. And he also takes on a new role as an expert witness in a case where the personnel involved bring back memories of his past. Jean is studying foxes, but she is also helping a client build a roof garden, dealing with an illegal fox hunt she comes across, defending foxes on the radio and re-building a relationship with her son, Luke.

The kinds of connections that Forna explores in her book are not those where all these story lines turn out to be connected. Attila deals with his plot lines, Jean deals with hers (of course, there is some cross over: Jean gets involved in the search for Ama, for example). But their developing friendship means that they learn to experience some of what the other is going through.

In the mix with these different story lines developing in the book's present, Forna also takes time flesh out

her two main characters by jumping back in time. Attila is grieving for his wife, Maryse, whom he lost some time ago. And we also hear about some of his experiences in war zones. Jean is dealing with the break up of her marriage and we learn about her study of coyotes in USA prior to the foxes in urban UK.

If all this sounds like a lot for just 320 pages, there's an element of truth in that. Especially as there are also several side-characters with some, albeit less, character development.

It's a book that starts out with coincidence or chance encounters. It develops (because there is no such thing as coincidence, remember) into a book about living together, coexistence. Attila and Jean have lessons to learn about this, although I am not going to say what happens to the relationship they have after three "chance encounters". The solution to the coyote/fox problem is also about tolerance and finding a way to live together. The parakeet that adorns the cover of some editions is a sub-plot also about tolerance and coexistence.

By taking time to fill in the history of the two main characters, I think one of the things Forna is doing is saying we can't deal with things superficially - where we are now is deeply rooted in where we have come from. I think this is similar to what Ali Smith is doing in her seasonal quartet (Autumn and Winter both take time to ground current events in a historical context) and what Richard Powers has very recently done in *The Overstory* which very much focuses on the connections that draw people together. Forna's story opens with a prologue in which a wolf hunter in the early part of the 19th century tracks down a wolf: ostensibly, this has nothing to do with what follows, but the link wolf-coyote-fox is there pointing us towards what the book is telling us about.

It's a valid point. We easily take life at face value and are surprised by the twists and turns it presents us with. But perhaps we would be less surprised if we took a bit more time to understand the context, both our own history and that of those we interact with. The book is in part a plea for tolerance and understanding. Attila has a key view that the axiom "trauma = suffering = damage", which drives his profession, is wrong. Yes, trauma brings suffering, but suffering does not necessarily equate to damage, he says. It can be what makes us (more) human. The book seems to me to be asking us not to try to heal everyone of every little bit of suffering they have endured, but to appreciate that some things can make us better people. Sometimes, perhaps, suffering does not mean damage as much as it means greater tolerance and understanding.

Writing this has slightly altered my view of this book. As I started writing, I wasn't sure about the reliance on coincidence or about the sheer number of different plot lines that were being progressed. But, on reflection, they are perhaps a key strength of the book given what I understand its main motivations to be. I could be wrong (it wouldn't be the first time), but this is certainly a book to dwell on after reading it which is always a positive.

My thanks to the publisher for a free review copy via NetGalley.

Sara says

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

This is a story of serendipity. The chance meeting of two strangers on Waterloo bridge caused by a fox. What follows is a story that transcends time, culture, and what it is to be truly happy.

This is a complicated tale, with an uneasy structure. It travels backwards and forwards between places and people, meaning it can be difficult to commit and get deeply involved with all of the stories. I'm not a fan of

this kind of story telling normally, as I'm easily confused and distracted by multiple side stories within an overall arc. However, there is a real depth of emotion written here, that resonates throughout the whole story. At its heart is a sad tale of two lonely people hoping to connect with someone at a time in their lives when they just need to feel a deeper connection to something. That's an overlying theme here, as we see a connection not only with other people, but also something deeper and more primal.

Because of the added stories, the plot can sometimes be slow. However, I'm glad I persisted as this is wonderfully well written. Forna manages to capture the culturally rich life of London beautifully, and I found myself lapping up the colourful richness of it all. I loved getting a different perspective of capital life, that I haven't read anywhere else before.

I just wish this had been edited a bit more tightly, and some sidestories maybe trimmed down, because I did find them distracting, however much I loved the writing style.

Hugh says

Aminatta Forna has been established as one of my favourite writers ever since I read *The Memory of Love*. Two of her other books - *The Devil That Danced on the Water* and *The Hired Man* are also among my favourites. So my expectations for this one were very high, and I was not disappointed.

Like *The Hired Man* this one starts quietly and builds towards a moving resolution. The opening tells of a wolfer (wolf hunter) in Massachusetts in 1834 but most of the book is set in modern London, making this the first of Forna's novels to be set in Britain.

The two main protagonists are Jean, a wildlife expert from Massachusetts who is watching urban foxes and Attila, a Ghanaian psychiatrist who specialises in helping victims in various war zones around the world. Attila is in London for a conference but gets involved in the case of his niece, who has been wrongly arrested in an immigration check, and whose son has run away. Having met a couple of times by chance, Jean joins Attila in the search, enlisting her network of fox watchers. Attila is also involved in helping Rosie, a former colleague and lover who is in a care home with early onset dementia.

There are also flashbacks to pivotal events that have affected Jean and Attila and their marriages (Jean is divorced and Attila is a widower). In Jean's case this allows Forna to explore the way coyotes evolved and migrated and to parallel public fears about them with similar panics about urban foxes. Attila's concern his work in Iraq and Sierra Leone.

Another central theme is the nature of both happiness and psychiatric disorders, and the differences in perceptions of them created by different cultural experiences and expectations.

I found the language interesting - when telling Jean's story Forna uses American language (such as sidewalk and dumpster) and I think this was a conscious decision.

As in *The Hired Man* the story builds gradually to an impressive and thought-provoking whole. Another fine book - for me a Booker nomination is long overdue.

Update 24 July: Sadly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the wait for a Booker nomination for Forna goes on, but she is one of the best writers never to have been nominated.

Andrea says

I just adored this book. It spoke to me on so many levels and I didn't want it to end. But end is inevitable, so as it was drawing to its conclusion I found myself instead wishing I could sit down and have a chat with... the author? ... maybe the character, Attila? I'm not fussy - either would do!

One evening, crossing Waterloo Bridge in London, Jean runs into Attila. Literally, ending up on the ground. She is a divorced American wildlife biologist, living in London while she conducts a study of urban foxes. He is a widowed eminent psychiatrist, from Ghana but educated in the UK, in the city to present the keynote address at a conference the following week. While waiting for the conference, Attila wants to catch up with his niece and spend some time with his friend who suffers from early-onset dementia.

In the following days, Attila and Jean encounter each other again. Coincidence? Not so, according to Jean, the scientist, who cleverly explains the causality. So when Attila's niece is admitted to hospital with diabetes complications, and her young son Tano runs away from temporary foster care, Jean is there to lend a hand. Between them they are able to conscript a group of searchers from the Ghanaian, Nigerian and Sierra Leonean communities - plus one silver-painted living statue - to search for the boy. Initially I thought this search was going to be the main thread of the story, but in fact it's just one of a number of events that take place over the course of the week to keep Jean and Attila within each others' orbits, and to show us a thing or two about connectedness.

This is a story about many things; coincidence, mental health, regret, wildlife conservation, hope, family, dealing with the past, migration, trauma, happiness, death and of course, love.

By the time Attila is due to speak at the conference, both he and Jean have had a glimpse of the possibility of happiness together. I loved the way Jean made sense of it to herself:

Love is a gamble, the stake is the human heart. The lover holds his or her cards close, lays them out one at a time and watches each move of the other player. To whom do you go first? This is the 'tell' of love. When a thing happens, be it good or bad, when you pick up the telephone or push through a crowd, who is it you most want to reach? More than anybody else Jean wanted Attila.

My first 5-star read of 2018, and this is one I'll be adding to my Favorites shelf.

With thanks to NetGalley and Bloomsbury Publishing for a copy to read and review.

Julie Christine says

"How do we become human except in the face of adversity?"

This elegantly written and richly cast novel speaks of adversity, both personal and political, that tests our willingness to greet the world with compassion, to believe in the possibility of happiness.

Attila Asare, a Ghanaian psychiatrist and expert on PTSD, and Jean Turane, an American wildlife biologist, meet by chance, and then chance again, in central London. Jean is living in London, conducting a study on the urban fox phenomenon; Attila is passing through to present at a conference, yet his connections to the city run much deeper. His ex-lover is fading away at a care facility in the suburbs, Alzheimer's corroding her brain. And as he arrives in London, he receives word that his niece has been detained by immigration and her young son has run off, disappearing into the February cold and dark.

It is the search for the boy, Tano, that unites this unlikely pair and brings to the foreground a cast of supporting characters. These characters — hotel employees, garbage collectors, street buskers, the homeless — are themselves immigrants, all making their way in a shadow economy far from the glittering highrises and bespoke suits of the storied British city.

The narrative moves from present to recent to mythical past, tracing the lines of a wolf hunter in Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century, the demise of Jean's marriage and her quest to save coyotes in New England in the mid-oughts, and Attila's work as a hostage negotiator and trauma specialist in war zones from Bosnia to Sierra Leone to Iraq. Despite the breadth of its landscapes, *Happiness* is the story of what happens deep inside the heart after grief and loss, after love has come and gone. And possibly come again. It is also deeply political, delving into human migration, animal conservation, and war. There are so many layers of theme and character and much of the narrative relies on coincidence to move it forward, yet Forna keeps this all spinning in delicate orbit with sublime writing and wonderful characters.

It was paradoxical, but nevertheless true that in this life and in his career Attila had often observed joy amongst those who had suffered most: it was what life gave in exchange for the pain.

An excellent read. Highly recommended.
