Literary Happy Endings

Closure for Sunny Imaginations

edited by Armelle Parey and Isabelle Roblin

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Who's Afraid of Happy Endings? Reflections on a Few Contemporary Novels

Armelle Parey

Abstract: Despite virulent attacks and deep dissatisfaction expressed by critics and sometimes novelists themselves, be they modern or postmodern in their approach, throughout the twentieth-century, happy endings have not necessarily completely deserted the contemporary novel but more often than not have evolved with their times. The aim of this paper is thus to point to ways in which happy endings still appear in the contemporary novel, with the world view and aesthetics entailed in their various transformations.

Key-words: Closed ending, Linda Hutcheon, Love, Neo-Victorian novels, Postmodernism, Rewriting, Self-consciousness, Kate Atkinson, *Human Croquet*, A.S.Byatt, *Possession,* Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary,* Joanne Harris, *Chocolat, Ian McEwan, Atonement,* Sarah Waters

Happy endings are generally associated with nineteenth-century novels, fairy tales, romances and a sunny belief in progress and order. This type of conclusion has thus generally been derided and explained away as imposed by the *zeitgeist or* by the requirements of a genre. But one may wonder if these explanations have any relevance when dealing with contemporary fiction. The belief in progress was eroded throughout the twentieth-century and seems completely out-of-date today. As for the question of genre, it does not seem very relevant either as genres have changed. For example, even contemporary fairy tales—from A.S. Byatt's stories collected in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994) to Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* (1999)—rarely display a blithe and innocent happy ending. There is therefore no obligation, no constraint for the contemporary novel to end happily. As David Lodge already pointed out about twenty-five years ago, "With the increasing acceptance of the open

rather than the closed ending, the issue of whether or not to conclude a story with a happy union of lovers scarcely arises for the modern novelist as it did so frequently for the Victorians." (152). So, when a happy ending does appear in a novel at the end of the twentieth century, it is a deliberate aesthetic choice worth examining. Focusing on fiction published over the last twenty years, the main questions this paper will attempt to answer are: what narratives do contemporary happy endings tell and how? When providing a positive resolution, is the contemporary novel merely reduplicating the happily ever after? Do upbeat outcomes still signify aesthetic and moral conservatism? Or do novelists rework traditional happy endings? Before exploring the new guise that positive closure may take as well as the effects it may produce, it is necessary first to verify what is meant by "happy ending".

Re-defining happy endings

More often than not, a "happy ending" implies an uplifting outcome in which love conquers all and justice is done. The problem is that critics tend to consider the happy ending as a monolithic unalterable block which presents an unchanging formula. David H. Richter opened his 1974 *Fable's End* with an equation between happy endings and closed endings:

> "And they all lived happily ever after"—so goes the conventional ending to many a fairy tale or romance. It is a powerful ending, for with those words "ever after" any lingering curiosity we might have about the prince and his lady is dispelled; they are in eternal bliss and we need not look far into our imagination to picture their never-ending summer's day. (1)

Thirty years later, in *The Seven Basic Plots* (2004) Christopher Booker applies Tolstoy's famous incipit to *Anna Karenina*—"All happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"—to happy endings when stories boil down to "a three-cornered struggle" (between hero, heroine and dark figure) with the same outcome: "the centre of light in the story emerges from the shadows to redeem the corrupted upper world, to end division and to bring everything at last into a state of perfect balance and harmony" (273), that is, "in most stories this final image of wholeness is centred on the union of the hero with the heroine" (269). There is thus a general tendency to see the happy ending as the epitome of fixity and stability in every domain, a set formula which operates via love and return to order which are in turn understood as eternal and permanent entities. These are certainties that need to be reconsidered, particularly when dealing with the contemporary novel.

First and foremost, happy endings should generally not be seen as such a fixed and stable unit because they—like every narrative ending—are the results of an

interaction between society and the individual (writer). Endings are indeed a sign of the times[1] and happy endings too as they vary according to "changing conceptions of happiness (or fortune)" (Pape 181). The end of a novel is also the very place a writer's departure from convention may be most noticed.[2]

Another commonly assumed feature of the happy ending is that it is seen as depicting a permanent situation, best heard in the expression of "happily ever after" of which a key feature is love (understood as eternal and synonym with happiness too). Modelled on classical fairy tales, a happy ending traditionally sees the heroes retributed for their hardship in requited love. In her essay "The End of the Novel of Love" (1997), American critic Vivian Gornick explains that, encouraged by western novels, generations grew up with the belief that romantic love was "emblematic of the search for self-understanding" (155): "we all (secretly or otherwise) subscribed to Aristophanes' fable: somewhere out there was our fated "other half", the one true love that would rescue us from loneliness and drift" (159). But is conjugal or romantic love still a telos in the contemporary novel? Ian Gregson identifies love as a feature typical of the classic realist novel too and opposes it to desire as postmodern:

> The centrality of its role in novels by Jane Austen and George Eliot, for example, is tied to a celebration of the human capacity for imaginative sympathy and self-transcendence, and the narrative linking of love and marriage reinforces a sense of social stability based upon individual happiness. Postmodernist desire contrasts starkly with this humanist concept; it is an anarchic force that tears selves apart. (6)

If Gregson is to be believed, happy endings cannot feature in postmodern novels or, put it another way, a postmodern novel cannot display a happy ending with love as final reward. It may be true that "the postmodern condition brings with it an incredulity towards true love" (Belsey 72) and that love "occupies a paradoxical position in postmodern culture: it is at once infinitely and uniquely desirable on the one hand, and conspicuously naive on the other" (72-73). I would argue that some novels do present a happy ending featuring love, but it does imply that love is re-defined and rid of the obligatory association with certainty and stability.

Finally, a positive conclusion is commonly seen as closed, a perfect example of the "terminal quiescence of the end" of a story (Brooks 103). Yet, I believe the contemporary happy ending is not static but indefinitely hinges on a paradox worth

1 "One of the great moments of ideological negotiation in any work occurs in the choice of a resolution for the various services it provides. Narrative outcome is the one place where transindividual assumptions and values are most clearly visible" (Blau du Plessis 3)

2 "Par ailleurs, s'il est vrai que la convention gouverne les dénouements romanesques, il n'en reste pas moins que c'est probablement aussi la partie du livre où l'on aperçoit le mieux le travail de contestation" (Larroux 9).

exploring: on the one hand, it is synonymous, as Booker suggests, with "perfect balance" (268) and "wholeness" (269); on the other hand, postmodernism as defined by Linda Hutcheon means ambiguity, instability, unfixedness: "Postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political" (*Politics* 1). I propose to go on to show that the postmodern paradox is flaunted to the reader of contemporary happy endings in various ways, before dealing with the political dimension implied when rewriting this type of closure.

Exhibiting happy endings

The contemporary novel's approach to happy endings bears the mark of postmodernism: "it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (Hutcheon *Politics* 1). When happy endings appear in the contemporary novel, they are rarely straightforward and innocent. Umberto Eco's definition of postmodernism, which most interestingly uses a romantic situation as an illustration, seems useful here to describe what happens to the happy ending in the contemporary novel:

> I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, 'I love you madly,' because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.' At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love. (174)

Irony, self-consciousness, awareness are the key ideas here. Just like Eco's postmodern lovers, novelists know that happy endings are a tricky issue. So, more often than not, they openly engage with the "happily ever after" that is then presented with distance, irony and circumspection. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* John Fowles already foregrounded the trope when he offered a parody of the traditional Victorian "wind up" crowning the happy ending when he had Charles remain on the train and marry Ernestina. But without "the tell-tale compression of the pages before them" (Austen 203), readers immediately knew this happy ending appearing only two-thirds through the novel was a mockery which emptied the *topos* of its meaning without "replenishing" it in any way (John Barth). The situation is different in more

recent texts that bare the device in various ways, thus limiting the escapism and possibly challenging the reader to reflect on the practice, but may still manage to offer a happy ending.

The self-consciousness through which devices are revealed, this awareness may make its way in the text in the narrator's or characters' discourse with an overt discussion of what the happy ending is and says, of its form, content and impact. For instance, in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), the heroine apologizes for her immature yearning for a happy ending in a novel. Talking about Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (which constitutes a hypotext for Fielding's novel), she writes: "The basis of my own addiction, I know, is my simple need for Darcy to get off with Elizabeth. […] They are my chosen representatives in the field of shagging or, rather, courtship." (247). In the very first chapter of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), the reader is alerted to the construction of fiction and of the moral value of its happy endings with the character of Briony. The young girl is an apprentice-writer, in whose play the heroine is eventually "rewarded by reconciliation with her family and wedding with the medical prince on 'a windy sunlit day in spring'" (3). For the young orderly apprentice writer that Briony is, marriage is "a reward withheld until the last page" (7). This view of things is thus also presented as childish. More forcefully still in Kate Atkinson's *Human Croquet* (1997), happy endings and the myth of romantic love are derided in discussions and allusions to reveal and criticise their traditional conservative and limiting role for girls. Thus, when Isobel despairs of ever attracting attention from the opposite sex, a friend means to reassure her with: "Oh, it'll happen to you one day,' Carmen says airily. 'It happens to everyone—you fall in love, you get married, you have kids, that's what you do... someone will come along.'"(160). With this deliberately bored and boring presentation of a girl's future, Atkinson defamiliarizes the happy fate usually granted to the heroine. In every case, there is an open discussion or allusion which sets up a distance, invites the reader to stand back and think, elements which, in postmodern manner, contribute to "de-naturalize" (Hutcheon *Politics* 2) the obvious.

Having alerted the reader, the novel sometimes goes on to present its own happy ending, but marked by self-contradiction: postmodern writers can only write a romantic ending while saying this very conclusion is a lie. What Hutcheon notices as postmodernism's distinctive characteristic, a "kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness" (*Politics* 1) logically finds an outlet in variations of what first seems to be double endings. A happy ending may thus be destabilized by another version of the outcome. Again, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* comes to mind here but what Fowles really offered at the end of his seminal novel was alternative endings because he refused to "fix the fight", i.e. to favour one ending over another. Aware of

"the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the 'real' version" (390), he nevertheless pretended that both endings were equally valid: what mattered was the choice given to the reader. In Byatt's *Possession* (1990), the reader does not have to choose: the novel has a double plot and while the Victorian couple's passion is thwarted, the postmodern couple meets a happy ending.

Another type of doubleness is to be found in *Human Croquet* and *Atonement* which, each in their own way, offer self-contradictory positive outcomes since their happy ending obviously belongs to the realm of fiction... Atkinson's novel presents several interrelated plots: with Isobel in the main plot, imagining her mother's life in a subplot and re-creating her in a legendary frame in another subplot. One of the concluding chapters tells the happy ending to Lady Fairfax's sad story: the (Bluebeard) fairy tale is rewritten so that the character runs away with her lover, which contrasts with the fate hinted at for Eliza said to have been murdered by her neighbour and lover. However, the narrator has warned us before, woken up from her comatose sleep: "Only the imagination can embrace the impossible—the golden mountain, the fire-breathing dragon, the happy ending" (356). Lady Fairfax's happy ending is the fruit of the imagination of the narrator—who as an adult writes historical romances. Happy endings are both enunciated and enacted in the text as the stuff of fiction.

Ian McEwan in *Atonement* plays on doubleness too but reaches a different conclusion. At first, the novel seems to end on reconciliation: Robbie and Cecilia, the lovers, are reunited and Briony who brought misery onto them is going to repair what she can of the harm she has done them and will be forgiven. But this positive ending is immediately destabilized by its last words:

> She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin.
>
> BT
> London 1999. (349)

This happy ending is definitely not closed. It announces a new beginning for Briony looking to the future. Besides, it denies the state of "terminal quiescence of the end" as the reader is startled by the realization that Briony was, all along, the storyteller. But the novel does not actually stop at this stage. It is followed by a few pages of indeterminate status in which Briony, now openly the novelist, throws doubt on the happy ending narrated before:

> *It's only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away. All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But*

> *now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station.* (370)

Here as in *Human Croquet*, the happy version is the stuff of fiction (within fiction) while real life (fiction) offers a bleak or darker one. But contrary to Atkinson, McEwan asserts the supremacy of fiction: "As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (371). *Atonement* is not caught in a closed binary system but remains unstable with questions as to the reasons for this happy ending and the perspective of rewriting the happy ending again.

Rewriting happy endings

The other aspect of postmodernism that Hutcheon puts forwards is that it is "unavoidably political": postmodern artists "signal the inescapably political contexts in which they speak and work" (*Politics* 4) but here again they display their ambiguity as postmodern art "at once purveys and challenge ideology—but always self-consciously" (4). Traditional happy endings partake of conservative ideology[3] which some writers choose to pinpoint and sometimes to counter by reworking the happy ending.

Aware of the links between power and the discourse of history, some novels rewrite the past in the sense that they challenge what has been written and offer alternative versions. Neo-Victorian novels, which re-present the Victorian era from a different perspective, offer good examples of the use to which the convention of the happy ending is put: the traditional rewards are kept but they are awarded to the usually excluded, to characters whom Linda Hutcheon calls when defining historiographic metafiction: "the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (*Poetics* 114). Such is the case in two of Sarah Waters's novels set in Victorian times, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Fingersmith* (2002): after many difficulties and twists in the plot, the young lesbian heroine eventually finds true love, as part of a straightforward happy ending. At the end of *Fingersmith*, for instance, the villains are indeed punished (Mr Lilly has a stroke and suffers a humiliating end; Gentleman is murdered (probably by Maud) and Mrs Suckby hanged while Sue and Maud are finally reunited and there is the promise of wealth as Sue finds herself the heiress to a large fortune.

3 In her introduction to *Famous Last Words* for instance Alison Booth posits that novelistic endings rarely offer more than double or binary choices for most female characters.

Another case in point appears to be Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997). In the very last pages, the convict is not punished by death (as in Tobias's novel or Magwitch in *Great Expectations),* but goes back to Australia where, with a loving wife, he begets more children and more riches and eventually dies "with his weeping sons and daughters crowded round his bed" (356). But in fact this happy ending is too good to be true as Carey's accumulation of positive things is redolent of Henry James's summary of the Victorian "happy ending": "a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks" (590). The complex result is that while offering a propitious ending to his convict, Carey also signals it as a construction as much as Tobias's. In other words, he challenges his own version of the story.

Other novels offer a new version of the happy ending, in the sense that it does not revolve around love or the marriage plot. Indeed Joanne Harris's heroine in *Chocolat* (1999) experiences fulfilment without the final romantic note. In a feud which creates tension in the village, Vianne fights the dark figure/the village priest alone, albeit with the help of some in and out of the community. Roux, the male character who helps Vianne never takes over the fight. It is interesting to note that he does not reach full foreground status even though he qualifies for the role of the lover (twice). The love plot does not take over: at the end, Vianne (a single mother to a six-year-old) is said to be pregnant with Roux's child after one night under a "starry purple sky" (302) but she remains single. The romantic happy ending (love as a reward after much misery) applies to secondary characters and is thus relegated to the background. What the novel really ends on in Vianne's sense of achievement. Having beaten her own demons at the same time, Vianne finally experiences a feeling of personal satisfaction: "My voice sounds different to me now, bolder, stronger […] My fears are gone. […] The new voice inside me laughs, and the sound is like coming home" (319). In this novel, the ending is both happy (with Vianne's sense of achievement and the community's return to order) and open as indeterminacy defines Vianne's future as there is no certainty regarding her immediate future: "Hoping that this time it will remain a lullaby. That this time the wind will not hear. That this time—*please, just this once*—it will leave without us" (319).

Both *Possession* and *Bridget Jones' Diary* offers a telling revision of the romantic ending. In accordance with one of the many meanings of its subtitle ("a Romance"), Byatt offers her twentieth-century heroes a happy ending that involves requited love; but it is an updated pattern since freedom and flexibility dominate Roland's proposal to Maud: " 'I could let you be […] I wouldn't threaten your autonomy […] We could think of a way—a modern way—Amsterdam isn't far—' " (507). Helen Fielding's novel has been criticized as anti-feminist (see Marsh 53-54).

It is easy to see why: Fielding's novel reproduces what Christopher Booker identifies as a most common situation "where we see the passive heroine helpless in the clutches of the dark power […] and where the hero has finally to prove himself by engaging in a battle to release her" (269). This is the fairy-tale scenario of "Cinderella" and "Sleeping beauty" which end up with the prospect of the union between the heroine and the prince. Bridget is obsessed with finding the other half in order to be like everybody else. Despite her many attempts at self-improvement in the course of the novel, she remains much the same and what wins Darcy's heart appears to be her very faults. So, in a way, she is just another version of the fairy-tale heroine whose passivity is glorified. An American critic explained the attacks against the novel with "What's really bothering people about 'Bridget Jones' is that it signals the return of what is referred to in English-lit classes as the marriage Plot" (Merkin 71 qtd in Marsh 66), but is it really what *Bridget Jones* is about? According to Kelly Marsh, Fielding turns to Jane Austen's novels (both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*[4]) "for some perspective on popular contemporary notions of what the self can and should be" (71). I would like to check this idea briefly in relation with the happy ending... It has been pointed out that Jane Austen extends her irony to the endings she gives her marriage-plots, notably in the way she non-narrates or deliberately withholds the scene when mutual love is finally acknowledged, particularly in *Emma*.[5] This same deliberate non-narration is to be found at the end of Fielding's novel, when the actual discourse of love is not considered worth telling because she is aware that Darcy uses the same words as her previous (unreliable) boyfriend—"and he told me all this stuff about how he loved me: the sort of stuff, to be honest, Daniel was always coming out with" (306). Bridget may yearn for a boyfriend and possibly wish to become one of the Smug Married but she is not blind. Moreover, she seems to have gone past the notion of true love, of the one and only, of the uniqueness of one's partner: one of her final remarks applies to having "finally realized the secret of happiness with *men*" (307, emphasis added) as opposed to a single unique human being. Fielding's character is a resolutely contemporary figure in the sense that Bridget illustrates turn-of-the-century attitudes to love.[6] Fielding's plot does not reach exactly the expected happy ending (from the open reference to *Pride and Prejudice*) as it displays no actual belief in true love. It certainly does not present the reader with the certainty of eternity of true love but closes on an obviously provisional happy

4 For *Emma* as other influence, see Marsh 63-65.

5 See, for instance, Deanna K. Kreisel.

6 "We think of love […] as a significant undertaking, an investment in our future well-being, that must be approached carefully and rationally. Few adults today take seriously the notion that we each have a perfect match, someone in the world who would complete us as a missing piece does a puzzle. We might describe our lover as our soulmate yet also understand that he or she is almost certainly not the only one who might be so described" (Dowd 552).

ending, as Bridget when summarizing her past year recounts: "Boyfriends 2 (but one only for 6 days so far)" (310).

In the absence of the "ever after", both Fielding's and Harris's novels contradict the traditional equation between closed and happy ending, preferring to lay the stress on the temporariness of the final stages reached. They write beyond the (happy) ending—if I may adapt Blau du Plessis's phrase—insofar as they invent narrative strategies "that express critical dissent from dominant narrative" (5).

It is true that the games around closure displayed in contemporary fiction can be traced back to John Fowles in 1969 but they now occupy a place that they never did before. As Richard Bradford judiciously reminds us, "*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is treated by many as landmark, but it should in truth be regarded as such principally because of its isolation within a landscape of fiction that was still predominantly conservative in its manner and frame of reference"(10). In the same way, the idea of love as eternal may have already been de-familiarized before by feminist writers who challenged the accepted view of the happy ending.[7] But instead of being marginal, the postmodern attitude towards love is finally seeping through mainstream fiction and bestsellers. This is not a given as testifies the fact that when adapted to the screen, there is a return to most conventional happy endings: in Lasse Hallstrom's *Chocolat,* for instance, Roux, the gipsy, stays with the heroine to form a family and all doubt as to the outcome has disappeared. Happy endings, somewhat renewed and often ambiguous, indicating a perpetual tugging between doubt and hope, still feature in novels. Investigating contemporary happy endings reveals that the latter are suited to their times, both formally and thematically. They often flaunt the ambiguity and inconclusiveness which the Victorians felt compelled to hide.[8] Contemporary novelists are not afraid of happy endings: they know that as a trope this type of closure is definitely a site to be investigated and possibly subverted to challenge beliefs.

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7 I am thinking here of feminist writers like Anne Sexton and Angela Carter whose work challenged and revised canonical fairy tales and in so doing challenged traditional representations of gender.

8 As Lodge, among others, has shown, the Victorians were able to dissent and remain ambiguous.

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