



## Happy Baby

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Some stories begin with happy-ever-after...HAPPY BABY is the story of Theo, once the eponymous happy baby, but later an orphan in foster care and now a grown man living in California. Haunted by memories of neglect, abandonment and abuse, Theo returns to Chicago where he lived as a troubled adolescent, to track down an old girlfriend. Told in reverse order, this is an edgy and powerful novel, chilling in its portrayal of a life slowly yet systematically disintegrating.

## **Happy Baby Details**

Date : Published April 1st 2005 by Picador USA (first published February 19th 2004)

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Author : Stephen Elliott

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## From Reader Review Happy Baby for online ebook

### Allan MacDonell says

I won't presume to imagine Stephen Elliott's reaction on the day, not long after the publication of Elliott's *Happy Baby*, when wunderkind street hustler author JT LeRoy was exposed as a middle-aged woman named Laura Albert. Unaware of Albert's grandest and grossest fiction—her impersonation of a young man afflicted with AIDS—Elliott had placed a chunk from a JT LeRoy interview ahead of his own precise and sure *Happy Baby* narration, and a JT LeRoy blurb gushes on the novel's back cover. So, I pick up *Happy Baby* in 2014, and I immediately congratulate myself on my broadmindedness for going forward with reading the book despite the author's obvious appeal and susceptibility to fraudulent trolls. About five pages in, I am in the thrall of the real deal, slipping into the flow of honest, clear-eyed hard truths, stripped of victim posturing and self-pity, with a bit of a chip on the shoulder, perhaps, but that bit of chip is just right, just short of righteous. I read on, assured that the authenticity of Stephen Elliott's voice is absolute and a separate matter from the author's time in juvenile justice and social services custody, and—*voila*—my broadmindedness is rewarded with gritty, dirty storytelling that actually makes me feel better about being a human being.

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### Paul says

sad, wise and heartbreaking. what more could you ask for in a book? the writing is first rate and what's even better -- the writer knows what he's talking about. he's lived the life and it's palpable. the book is told in reverse order but, once you understand that, it's not a problem. i read this book right after reading 'the delivery man' by joe mcginess jr. hated that book because it was so false you felt it in every page. hey joe, if you want to know what's it like to write about fucked-up characters who make a lot of poor decisions, read 'happy baby.' it's everything 'the delivery man' is not....and that's a very good thing for 'happy baby.'

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### Jennifer says

i learned that stephen elliot is a really good writer, and he took me on a little old trip - a trip to those hideous places unplaceable orphans and the children of the fantastically inept are placed, and an explanation of why he likes to get beat up in the right way by a woman he is terrified of.

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### ds white says

readable but forgetable

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### Rachel Cassandra says

this book should really have four and a half stars. i found the format of this novel (progressing backwards by

chapter) to be perfectly suited for the subject matter (bdsm, juvenile detention centers, and abuse), and Steven Elliot's observations were simple and true. I have one complaint (don't read this if you're planning to read the book...)we never find out really why he got into the detention center. It drove me a little nuts, especially since that is what started his whole life on this particular course.

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### **Alexandra says**

Told anti-linearly, this book illuminates darker corners of the sadomasochistic mind in a more thoughtful and sensitive fashion than I expected. It is about the marriage of sexuality and violence. Brave, sparse and lovely. Plus Stephen Elliott is super nice---I met him (and bought this book) at a Sex Worker's Art Show; he showed us his scars.

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### **M. says**

This book reminded me of how I felt when I had to read *The Stranger* in high school. Back then I was confused by the existentialist tone and the attitude of the main character, who had a total resignation towards his shitty life as it happened around him. *Happy Baby* had that similar resignation, but it was one I was well familiar with. Something I used to liken to being stuck in the doldrums at sea. The feeling of helplessness. Of simply being a recipient of mundanity, violence, and existence at the constant mercy of other people's power over you. *Happy Baby* makes your impoverished, institutionalized life seem somehow magical, cause it's real.

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### **Kate says**

oh man. good but a harrowing read. definitely a poor choice on my part for beach reading.

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### **Erin Beck says**

I now totally understand why some people like to be beaten while in sexual situations.

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### **Peter says**

"Wow."

That's what I said last evening upon finishing Stephen Elliott's impressive *Happy Baby*. Though the subject matter, particularly the scenes of S&M and drug use, is often quite disturbing, this book has an oddly uplifting quality to it. Elliott based the novel generously on his own childhood as a ward of the State of Illinois, and it's a tightly written adventure through group homes, juvenile detention facilities and ultimately

the outside world, from the sex trade of Amsterdam to file-clerk hell in Chicago and on to a San Francisco bagel shop, before inconclusively ending in Chicago.

The book is expertly written in present tense, with the chapters presented in reverse chronological order, with both methods effectively presenting the story. The present tense makes the clear distinction between the not-so-bad now and the protagonist Theo's darker past. More importantly, the reverse chronological order lets the reader know upfront that Theo somehow managed to survive his various ordeals. Had the book been written in standard chronological order, midway through the book the reader could easily have abandoned it, not wanting to see things get any worse for Theo. But in reverse order, I saw that he survived, and continued reading, wanting to know how he became the way he turned out.

As I mentioned, the ending is inconclusive. Theo will again be running away ("...one more time. I've got one left in me.") towards an uncertain but not necessarily grim future. He's survived up to that point, over and over again, and he'll undoubtedly survive one more time. And he insists it will be the last time he runs away, and I couldn't help hoping he finally finds a place to settle down and find the love and inner peace that has always eluded him.

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### **P. says**

I downloaded a free copy from Mr. Elliott's website. And I read this while simultaneously reading Elliott's newest book, *The Adderall Diaries*, and while reading the oral histories of his childhood friends and acquaintances on therumpus.net. All of these writings deal in some way with the same subject and time period --- so I feel like maybe I will end up remembering all of it in a lump, fictionalized and not.

So, anyway. Elliott has a very clear way of writing without sacrificing description. One part that sticks with me is the description of taking a breath feeling like "rubbing my lungs with my finger" (That's not a direct quote but it is very close I think). This book would be valuable because it's an open depiction of a protagonist who enjoys violent sex (for some reason I get the impression that this is not common, feel free to educate me), but moreover it's valuable just because it's a good book. It captures experiences that its readers may never have had or have desired and makes them relatable. There's a good sense of lost-ness and that kind of young toughness that's just vulnerability. I feel bad that I didn't in some way pay for my reading experience.

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### **Emily says**

picked this up to see what my tolerance level is like for forthright prose by slightly damaged thirty-something males in a post-eggers world. plenty of dripping candlewax & coke-and-mirrors so far. but i'm all for futzing around with chronology and this one's told backwards.

at the end of it all, i realised i never let myself get below the surface of the story. that might be my fault as a

reader, but might also be the distance at which the prose held me. it's clearly heartfelt, clearly very real. and because the subject matter is so harrowing at times, an OTT writing style wouldn't have fit either. the prose was good, solid. the detail was accurate and dispassionate. but eventually the declarative simplicity made me squirm and i put the book down feeling guilty for not having been more affected by it.

for one thing, the reverse-order storytelling didn't add much to the impact of the narrative. the happy baby only appears in the title - or the first chapter, as maria's baby seems to have a better life than either maria or theo. the margins of the story were too wide - we don't know where he's heading on from the first chapter, nor do we see theo before he's ten or so. i liked the scatter-shot effect of the chronology of the details to some extent, but it killed the suspense. i knew almost everything i needed to within the first couple of chapters.

clearly i was in the mood for something low-plot, not no-plot.

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### **Jeff says**

My favorite of the three novels by Elliott that I've read. His portrayal of children in foster care in Chicago seems improbably horrific, but I suspect some very real life experience was utilized to create the scenes described in "Happy Baby." Each chapter works as a stand alone short story, and the literary device Elliott uses here (telling the story in reverse chronology) brings the main character, Theo, into intense focus by the end (when Theo is a 5th grader). The narrative is sparse, but there is just enough in each chapter to allow you to fill in the blanks and understand where the masochistic adult-Theo comes from. While the book is filled with descriptions of abuse, particularly by adults, the writing is tender and honest and mostly devoid of anger and judgment. I think that's the major accomplishment of this novel.

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### **Craig says**

I read this book because I discovered The Rumpus on the internet and then Stephen Elliott on twitter. I subsequently signed up for The Rumpus's newsletter and began to look forward to reading Elliott's emails. So, I went to my local book store, Skylight Books in Los Feliz, and bought Happy Baby, not knowing what to expect really. Reading someone's fiction is drastically different than reading their letters.

Elliott's book is beautiful, it's quiet and unassuming and seemingly very honest. It reminds me of the feeling you have when you travel early in the morning and you're half-asleep, you sit in the train, bus, or airport terminal watching the people and listening to the conversations, but you feel like you're very far away and in your own world. The narrator feels like that, only he's talking about his own life.

I was struck by the stark beauty of it all, like a forest in winter, or a field at dusk. I can't say enough nice things about this book and the structure of it. By going backwards the reader has an incredible feeling of discovery, like tracing a memory in therapy, knowing the ultimate truth, but having forgotten it years ago.

I would recommend you read this book right away.

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## **Imogen says**

That's so weird that I never reviewed this- I just left my review for *The Adderall Diaries* and saw that I didn't have a rating here. Stephen always says this is his best book, but I think it's just his best pre-*Adderall Diaries*. They do such different things, though, it's hard to compare them; this is definitely the best novelization of his early life, though. The backwards conceit works well, the prose (as always) is clear and direct and gives you room to feel however you want about it, although the way you will feel is probably "sad." Recommended.

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## **Rogine says**

Written in a nonlinear manner, Stephen Elliott accompanies his readers through Theo's heartbreak and haunting story that started from his current life as a submissive and spineless adult to his abusive and violent childhood. Elliott tells such a heavy and difficult story to read in a light and subtle way that it left the readers developing a slight ache in their hearts despite not knowing the roots of Theo's troubles until the end.

I am fond of books, movies, TV shows, and any type of media that can be described as sad, dark, and hopeless. I was never able to pinpoint what aspect of media that pulls me in until *Happy Baby* successfully helped me figure out why I appreciate these particular themes and what make them "good" in my eyes.

Elliott provides a bird's eye perspective on Theo's day-to-day life. The nonlinear style of writing in the book is a really important feature because it gives readers a sense of hopelessness that will remain unresolved. The book starts with him being in an abusive relationship with a sadistic woman, but there is really no way for the readers to know what follows after that because the story goes backwards from there. The rest of the book provides an explanation on why Theo is the person he is today, but the question of whether or not he will overcome the circumstances that had held him back for so long still remains. And that's what I love about this book and the "depressing" genre in general: the unanswered questions that leave the consumers feeling empty and uneasy.

That's exactly what *Happy Baby* did to me, and Theo's story continues to haunt me from time to time because I know this fiction is someone else's reality. Elliott did a wonderful job in creating an emotional impact on his readers by not blatantly throwing to the readers' faces how messed up Theo's life was but instead doing it subtly and letting it accumulate to our hearts with every page that passes.

*Happy Baby*, contrary to the seemingly lighthearted title, is possibly one of the most depressing books I've ever read (and that says a lot because I read a lot of those kinds of books). The slight ache in my heart remains there, and the thought that Theo's story continues to be someone else's reality haunts me. Elliott is a very talented writer, and I look forward to reading his other books.

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## **Julia Smillie says**

I waffled a lot on whether to give this book three or four stars. Sometimes I found the subject matter -- S&M, drugs, sodomy -- difficult to read. Sometimes I found the subject matter -- love, identity, pain, loss -- enveloping. Mostly I liked it. Some passages were searingly beautiful. I think it's a really significant novel, beautifully executed. Having read some of Elliott's nonfiction, it's impossible to read this without knowing that much of it is rooted in reality. I'm not sure whether that makes it harder or easier, better or worse. It just

means I kept thinking I was reading a memoir and had to remind myself it wasn't. Not really. But sort of.

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### **Patrick O'Neil says**

Stephen Elliot's *Happy Baby* is beautiful. Although I am not saying the subject matter is beautiful. Violence, sadness, desperation, fear, abandonment, and rape - are not subjects that are beautiful. However the book is still beautiful. Elliot's sparse writing style of stripped down quick prose not only gets the job done, but flows with the rhythm, or maybe the pulse, of who he was then - even though it is the "him" of now that is telling us the story. If that makes any sense, I don't know.

This is the first book of Elliot's that I've read. I'd heard a lot of good things about him. And finally went to one of his readings here in LA a few months ago and totally dug what he read. A good friend lent me this book, and I'm now off to scrounge his newest *The Adderall Diaries* from another good friend (thank the gods for good friends that read) - I really don't think I'll be disappointed.

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### **Sara Habein says**

Reading *Happy Baby* after already reading Elliott's memoir *The Adderall Diaries*, it's impossible not to compare the two and notice the semi-autobiographical nature of the novel. Like Theo, Elliott lost his mother at a young age and has an abusive father. Like Theo, Elliott was a ward of the state in Illinois during his teenage years and spent time in group homes. He attempted suicide; he attempted to block out the world by concentrating on simple pain. The sum total of what is and isn't true remains hard to determine without knowing the man personally, but what's important is that it all *feels* true.

(Full review can be found on Glorified Love Letters.)

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### **Sofia says**

Interesting, this, though I'm not sure whether it has quite the desired effect. The movement into the past feels like regression, but also potentially positively, therapeutically, rather than entirely fatalistically. I kind of feel like it should've had a bit more substance, but it illustrated a lot of stuff I'd been uncertain about.

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