

## **Book review**

# **Happiness in a Northern Town**

Sandie McHugh and Jerome Carson (Eds.)  
Whiting & Birch, 2021, 264 pages, £17.95 (Pb).  
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*Happiness in a Northern Town* follows a compendium of articles written by a collective of writers and voices who muse upon the phenomenon of happiness, specifically within the context of the Northern town, Bolton, England. The collectivity of writers gives rise to a variety of writing styles. Differentiation in both style and voice can often bring discomfort for a reader. However, the literary change within each chapter worked well for this text, separating the chapters coherently and making the academic text a more pleasurable and dynamic read.

Each chapter brings with it a new study, perception, and story behind happiness. The book begins, however, with the foundations of the subject and story behind the study of Boltonians in general. *Happiness in a Northern Town* begins in 1937 with the exploration of data behind a mass observation project which aimed to discover what Boltonians thought of happiness and how this was perceived and structured within their daily lives. The study was cut short in 1940 due to the stress of war, but the research that was conducted (and later found) was instrumental in establishing the foundations of knowledge on happiness and happiness-based research. In the introduction and opening chapter, the focus is placed upon this early mass observation study. A replication of this study took place in 2014, again in Bolton; hence the first and continued focus of the chapters upon the Northern town. The two studies make Bolton a unique place for exploring happiness, as no other location in the UK, or elsewhere, has had two separate and replicated studies that focus on happiness set so many years apart. It is what is both intriguing and sets this book apart from others that explore the realms of happiness. The book provides insight into not only how happiness is understood and interpreted but also a discussion of how conceptions and feelings of happiness have changed post-industrialisation and within contemporary society.

What is happiness? What does it consist of? How do we discover it? And why is it so important for human society? These are just a few of the questions that this book explores. Many of the chapters project understandings and reflections of happiness which may be relatable to our own lives, however, several of the chapters also force us to reconsider what happiness is to us and how it forms presence in our lives. This can be seen through the chapters which focus on '*Fitness and Happiness*', '*Happiness through Enabling Others*' and even discovering happiness with '*Faith and Happiness*'.

The book features a collection of autoethnographic accounts in which the authors write about their interpretations of the dynamisms of happiness in conjunction to a particular life event they have experienced. The stories which take this form are a key component of the book's accessibility. They help to peel back the 230-page academic text into something that is more widely available to readers, presenting complex academic concepts in a popular and accessible form of writing. Autoethnographic or biographic accounts situate themselves closely to a form of storytelling, allowing the writer to recount a life event which - in the case of this text - contextualises academic conceptualisations and theory with a real-life individual story. Happiness is an inherently human concept and, as such, highly subjective. As a result, autoethnography highlights the personal stories that happiness research may entail in a very human form of storytelling.

*Happiness in a Northern Town*, however, manages to balance both objective quantitative studies alongside the subjective personal experiences that other chapters include. The book is based around the context of *Northernness*, and this is brought back into focus in the last few chapters ('*A bit of grim makes us great up North*'; '*Happiness: is there really a North-South divide?*'). Within this section, the depiction of the North is reviewed: it dives into what it means to be a Northerner and whether in fact this can reveal our conceptions of happiness. It offers an interesting and enticing read, enjoyable for any philosophically attuned reader, delving into subjects spanning from northern spirit to the meaning of life. Throughout the book, the context is brought back to the realities of the 'real world' and not just left hanging in the air with theoretical suspension. Going forwards, the book attempts to address the heavily debated North-South divide which exists not just politically but also as a psychological blockade within England's makeup. In doing so, it focuses on the prosperity gap which exists between both halves of the country, and whether happiness is harder to find in the North.

The book ends by bringing us back to where it all began: the mass observation study of Bolton. This final chapter ties the book together nicely by focusing on the results of a repeated study conducted in 2014. In this chapter, the reader discovers how happiness sits within the context of a contemporary Bolton compared to 1938, and the future prospect of happiness and mental wellbeing that lies ahead for Boltonians today.

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