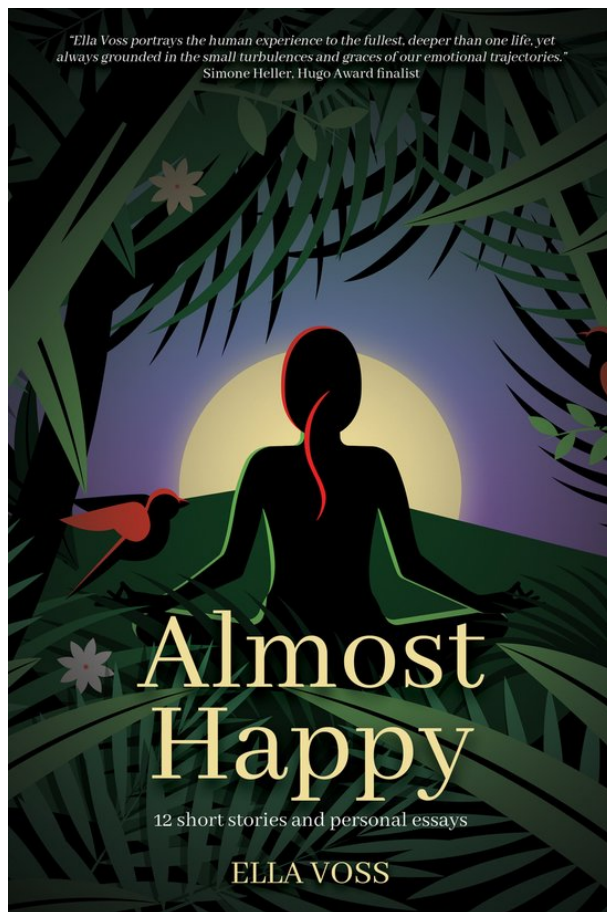


REVIEW

Coming to Terms with Yourself — A Review of “Almost Happy” by Ella Voss

by Lisa Schantl

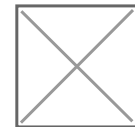


The short story collection *Almost Happy* by Ella Voss (2023, Matador) is a rollercoaster ride through what it means to be a woman of Western origin between 30 and 40 in a history-ridden, digitalized and globalized world. In twelve fictional encounters, the readers are invited to search for their destinies, their desires, and their points of departure. After her debut novel *Like a Fox to a Swallow* (2021, Matador), this is the author's second self-standing publication.

Almost Nonfiction

In *Almost Happy*, the Germany-born and -resident author Ella Voss takes her readers to different places in the world and under the skin of various female lives. What remains constant is the perspective: In every story, we find ourselves looking through the eyes of a female unnamed narrator, either in first- or third-person view. Especially with the stories told in first-person narration, it is hard to not fall into the trap of depicting the author as the protagonist. Yet, one is not too far off with making this assumption, as Ella Voss herself explains in a peculiarity of the volume: After four chapters of stories, there are thirteen personal essays on craft and inspiration, one for every fictional story and an additional one for the epilogue. I read the respective note after every story, and learned to appreciate them over time. Many characters are deeply inspired by the author's own experiences, and the images used are not seldomly taken directly from her own life. The story notes help the reader to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction when the stories begin to feel almost too real.

One consequence of such an almost-but-not-quite nonfictional account is that the protagonists blur into each other. This happens to the extent that one could occasionally mistake the collection for a fictionalized account of but one female life, sketched across alternative realities, playing with the infamous



"Almost Happy" by Ella Voss

"what if"-question. The characters share dreams and goals, fears and lusts, often universalized with an undertone of social pressure to fit in. Especially in the stories included in the chapter "Almost Happy," we experience female protagonists filled to the brim with an unfulfilled desire to lead a standard family life, with a caring husband, kids, garden and beauty talks with mum-peers. Although the declared attempt is to subvert these stereotypes, the characters can never entirely let go of the idealization of such a life. When they happen to be the only single woman at a wedding party, they are surrounded by an atmosphere of guilt — and they never manage to take off their dress of shame. No matter how hard they try or how far out they swim, they end up aligning their strokes to societal expectations.

Breaking Free

The collection is at its strongest when the characters do jump out of the shadow of their creator and develop a life of their own. The first story in the book is of such a kind: “The Saints of Chennai” lured me in immediately and took me on an intense journey to India, where the lively and skillful narration raises questions about love and physical attraction, how we are different people in different places, and whether we gain freedom by finding or by losing ourselves.

*“And I was reminded that this is what real luxury is all about.
Having the time to tell someone dear all there is to your life and to
listen to all there is to his.”*

The female protagonist experiences an extremely close yet ultimately also deeply unsettling encounter with her fellow work traveler, Ryan. Reading about the deep connection between them, the pages seem to be set on fire with lust, desire and a profound caring between two souls. However, this tension only lasts for their shared time in the city of Chennai — their truth was not meant to survive one moment of weakness and the reality of Western society.

Another story that made an impression on me was “The Dove in the Attic.” Here, we slip into the role of a younger woman, an au pair who spends a year in Paris. Her hosts are rich, stoic characters with two little kids that she is supposed to take care of. In this scenario, the female figure that fits the scheme of being 30 to 40 years old is the host mother. Stylish, elegant, but stiff and cold, she navigates her life around her children and her husband, keeping them at a safe and simultaneously unhealthy distance. The au pair is not used to such an impersonal family life, but her wish for connection is rewarded with loose threads only.

A refined skill applied by Ella Voss is her use of images and motifs. In this story, a dove appears and it embodies all that a dove can represent — freedom, peace, innocence, etc. — but it is also quickly forgotten and not worth being talked about at a stylishly decorated dinner table. In her story notes, Voss writes that history inevitably repeats itself. The young au pair will possibly become the stiff mother that she despises, because of “the absence of any honest and open conversations”; because there is no room for discussion about why

peace and love cannot be maintained in modern lives. The young woman might not break free in this setting, as does none of the other characters, but she has a life ahead of her, and the understanding that she eventually shows for her host mother could also be a sign of self-reflection — maybe the start of a silent rebellion.

The Power of Stories

The part of the book that feels the most personal is part three, “Roots.” In this section, the characters are confronted with their own immediate past or the past of their ancestors. For these private encounters, the setting remains the author’s native country of Germany. The moments that connect the characters to their roots are deeply entwined in sickness and death, a divided country, and split generations. Apart from that, what connects the texts is the conveyed power of stories.

“The need for stories becomes especially pressing when part of the past has been lost, a black hole which needs to be filled. Only a story can then fill these gaps and restore a sense of identity.” (Story Notes)

Be it the grandmother that finds her voice and her story again when all others of her generation have passed away; the book that remains half-read because another story has ended; or the companionship found in reading to others — stories are powerful tools, with the capacity to unite as well as part.

The author has found her mode of expression in a different language than her mother tongue, a “liberating” feeling as she states in the book. The freedom to tell something very close to one’s heart in a way that one wants to is most visible in this chapter. Historical events such as West and East Germany, World War II, or the very personal event of her father dying from cancer are transformed into personal–impersonal accounts, as if she was taking a safe step back from the matter, to be able to speak her voice clearly. It never feels too close, it never feels too far away; Ella Voss manages to keep a subtle balance between her life and the way in which she chooses to narrate its parts.

“It is one of the beautiful things about writing, that it can free you from fear. Because whatever wild thing life is going to throw at you, you have the power to turn it into a wonderful story.” (Story Notes)

Haunted by Stereotypes

One story that is missing is the one from a queer and/or minority perspective. Throughout the book, we are in the roles of Western, heterosexual women, struggling with their seemingly inborn desire to marry, have children, lead a suburban life. We do not get to hear stories from the margins, from those who would probably choose a different life than the classic romcom anyhow. The characters in this collection fight the demons of stereotypes. However, in having them do so, the author falls into the trap of recreating these very stereotypes in a multitude of moves. While she maneuvers her way out from such conceptions in her notes, the stories themselves uphold versions of lives that feel more like “Desperate Housewives” than “a celebration of Almost Happy moments” (as the author promises in her prologue). After all, in writing stories from the heart, stories that are connected with oneself above anything else, taking a wider angle is probably not the easiest move to make. As a consequence, rather than celebrating difference, the book mourns cohesion, belonging and loss.

At the end of the collection, I was left with mixed feelings. I was moved by the tangible interpersonal relationships portrayed in the stories. I was empowered by the risks that many of the characters took to find themselves and their purpose in life. And I was frightened by the universalities and stereotypical truths that were, eventually, upheld instead of broken down. Approaching my thirties, the bitter aftertaste could not be ignored. Is this what my next years are going to feel like, being on a constant search for myself without ever being able to fully live up to it?

In the prologue, Ella Voss writes: “The modern notion of happiness [...] boils down to a kind of ‘having everything.’ A state which can best be achieved by ticking off what I call ‘the shopping list of life.’” For women, items on this list would be meeting the love of one’s life, having adorable children, and/or having a career. The author adds, in parenthesis, that a career by a woman would — no matter what — have “a whiff of Plan B.” This assertion is the underlying theme of the book: The right partner is an unquestionable desire and children are meant to be had in any case. This is also the assertion that you either identify with deeply

or that disconnects you from the contents right away.

No matter on which team you are, whether you find solace and comfort in the narrated tales or are left with a desire to go back to the baseline and question everything — *Almost Happy* is a chance to explore a life's decade that is often ignored in the mainstream. It is the decade in which we try the hardest to come to terms with who we are. If there is a larger truth conveyed in the stories, it is probably that: The greatest struggle in life is to make peace with who you are and who you have become. It is a challenge, but it's one worth engaging in for as long as you need.