"Happy Endings"

Margaret Atwood

John and Mary meet.

What happens next?

If you want a happy ending, try A.

A.

John and Mary fall in love and get married. They both have worthwhile and remunerative jobs

which they find stimulating and challenging. They buy a charming house. Real estate values go

up. Eventually, when they can afford live-in help, they have two children, to whom they are

devoted. The children turn out well. John and Mary have a stimulating and challenging sex life

and worthwhile friends. They go on fun vacations together. They retire. They both have hobbies

which they find stimulating and challenging. Eventually they die. This is the end of the story.

B.

Mary falls in love with John but John doesn't fall in love with Mary. He merely uses her body for

selfish pleasure and ego gratification of a tepid kind. He comes to her apartment twice a week

and she cooks him dinner, you'll notice that he doesn't even consider her worth the price of a

dinner out, and after he's eaten dinner he fucks her and after that he falls asleep, while she does

the dishes so he won't think she's untidy, having all those dirty dishes lying around, and puts on

fresh lipstick so she'll look good when he wakes up, but when he wakes up he doesn't even

notice, he puts on his socks and his shorts and his pants and his shirt and his tie and his shoes, the

reverse order from the one in which he took them off. He doesn't take off Mary's clothes, she

takes them off herself, she acts as if she's dying for it every time, not because she likes sex

exactly, she doesn't, but she wants John to think she does because if they do it often enough

surely he'll get used to her, he'll come to depend on her and they will get married, but John goes

out the door with hardly so much as a good-night and three days later he turns up at six o'clock

and they do the whole thing over again.

Mary gets run-down. Crying is bad for your face, everyone knows that and so does Mary but she

can't stop. People at work notice. Her friends tell her John is a rat, a pig, a dog, he isn't good

enough for her, but she can't believe it. Inside John, she thinks, is another John, who is much

nicer. This other John will emerge like a butterfly from a cocoon, a Jack from a box, a pit from a

prune, if the first John is only squeezed enough.

One evening John complains about the food. He has never complained about her food before.

Mary is hurt.

Her friends tell her they've seen him in a restaurant with another woman, whose name is Madge.

It's not even Madge that finally gets to Mary: it's the restaurant. John has never taken Mary to a

restaurant. Mary collects all the sleeping pills and aspirins she can find, and takes them and a

half a bottle of sherry. You can see what kind of a woman she is by the fact that it's not even

whiskey. She leaves a note for John. She hopes he'll discover her and get her to the hospital in

time and repent and then they can get married, but this fails to happen and she dies.

John marries Madge and everything continues as in A.

C.

John, who is an older man, falls in love with Mary, and Mary, who is only twenty-two, feels

sorry for him because he's worried about his hair falling out. She sleeps with him even though

she's not in love with him. She met him at work. She's in love with someone called James, who is

twenty-two also and not yet ready to settle down.

John on the contrary settled down long ago: this is what is bothering him. John has a steady,

respectable job and is getting ahead in his field, but Mary isn't impressed by him, she's impressed

by James, who has a motorcycle and a fabulous record collection. But James is often away on his

motorcycle, being free. Freedom isn't the same for girls, so in the meantime Mary spends

Thursday evenings with John. Thursdays are the only days John can get away.

John is married to a woman called Madge and they have two children, a charming house which

they bought just before the real estate values went up, and hobbies which they find stimulating

and challenging, when they have the time. John tells Mary how important she is to him, but of

course he can't leave his wife because a commitment is a commitment. He goes on about this

more than is necessary and Mary finds it boring, but older men can keep it up longer so on the

whole she has a fairly good time.

One day James breezes in on his motorcycle with some top-grade California hybrid and James

and Mary get higher than you'd believe possible and they climb into bed. Everything becomes

very underwater, but along comes John, who has a key to Mary's apartment. He finds them

stoned and entwined. He's hardly in any position to be jealous, considering Madge, but

nevertheless he's overcome with despair. Finally he's middle-aged, in two years he'll be as bald

as an egg and he can't stand it. He purchases a handgun, saying he needs it for target practice--

this is the thin part of the plot, but it can be dealt with later--and shoots the two of them and

himself.

Madge, after a suitable period of mourning, marries an understanding man called Fred and

everything continues as in A, but under different names.

D.

Fred and Madge have no problems. They get along exceptionally well and are good at working

out any little difficulties that may arise. But their charming house is by the seashore and one day

a giant tidal wave approaches. Real estate values go down. The rest of the story is about what

caused the tidal wave and how they escape from it. They do, though thousands drown, but Fred

and Madge are virtuous and grateful, and continue as in A.

E.

Yes, but Fred has a bad heart. The rest of the story is about how kind and understanding they

both are until Fred dies. Then Madge devotes herself to charity work until the end of A. If you

like, it can be "Madge," "cancer," "guilty and confused," and "bird watching."

F.

If you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage

agent and see how far that gets you. Remember, this is Canada. You'll still end up with A,

though in between you may get a lustful brawling saga of passionate involvement, a chronicle of

our times, sort of.

You'll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don't be deluded by any

other endings, they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just

motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.

The only authentic ending is the one provided here:

John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.

So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs, however, are known

to favor the stretch in between, since it's the hardest to do anything with.

That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what

and a what and a what.

Now try How and Why.

Source: http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~rebeccal/lit/238f11/pdfs/HappyEndings\_Atwood.pdf