



## One Great Book: Volume II, Episode 4 *Happiness for Beginners* by Katherine Center

[Show Notes](#)

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume II, Book 4: Happiness for Beginners

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

Readers, at first I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell you about this particular great book. I re-read it recently, in preparation to tell you all about it, but then I began to doubt myself. First, it's a story with a happy ending, and the literary establishment is often dubious of the merit of books with happy endings. Sad but true. And second, there is just so much *kissing*. Detailed kissing.

And yes, I'm aware that I sound like I'm twelve years old, but I really didn't want to tell you about the kissing. (I'm reminded of *The Princess Bride*: "Is this a kissing book?" Yes, reader, *yes it is*.)

But after I finished the kissing book, again, I kept thinking about how darn *happy* it made me when I turned the final page. The reading experience was just plain FUN. And I remembered how many readers have been DELIGHTED to encounter Katherine Center's books over the years, on my recommendation, and the one I've recommended the *most* is *Happiness for Beginners*. It's an easy-reading novel about happiness and human nature that never fails to land with the right reader.



It's a book that does *exactly* what it sets out to do, and that is exactly why *Happiness for Beginners* is One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

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[1:51]

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*Happiness for Beginners* is the story of Helen Carpenter, a thirty-two-year old still reeling from a bad divorce that ended a bad marriage, determined to get her life back on track. She needs a way to start over. So she'd been planning a trip to Paris, which Helen wryly says is both more her style and more typical divorcée behavior, but then her kid brother tells her about a notoriously difficult wilderness survival course in the remote mountains of Wyoming, this is three weeks in the wild with a bunch of strangers and whatever she can carry on her back.

Helen doesn't hike, and she doesn't do "outdoorsy," but she immediately recognizes that *this is what she needs*—something tough, something far outside her comfort zone. She wants to amaze everybody, including herself. Her plan is to "have a brave adventure with a bunch of



strangers that would totally change not just my life, but my entire personality... to set out alone in the world, to conquer it, and to return home a fiercer and more badass version of myself.”

[3:32]

Helen tells us her own story, in the first person, which is Center’s style in all her books. She writes “stories narrated by women about their own lives.” And, as a novelist, she is “interested in the ways people bounce back.” Helen is trying to find the bounce, so off into the woods she goes, all by herself.

Or at least that was the plan—but the night before her departure, when she shows up at her brother Duncan’s house to drop off her dog for pet-sitting, she finds out his best friend signed up for the course, too, and what’s worse, Duncan volunteered her to be his ride from Boston all the way to Wyoming. There’s nothing wrong with Jake, exactly—it’s just that he’s 21, and Helen doesn’t even *know* him, really—and more importantly she was supposed to be doing this thing on her own, and now her plans are wrecked before she even gets to the mountains.

The drive out definitely complicates things, and that is all I’m going to say about that. Except that when Helen arrives for her backcountry course, she really *does* feel alone—although, this time, the feeling is unwelcome. She’s a fish out of water, in every way: a city girl out in the wild, and a thirty-two year old with a bunch of college kids, whose life has already fallen apart, while to Helen it seems they’re barely old enough for their real lives to have begun. Despite all this, she’s determined to prove herself—if only to herself—by earning one of the three certificates that will be awarded to hikers for outstanding performance.

In the wild, Helen confronts a whole bunch of really awkward social dynamics, plus killer blisters, a summer blizzard, and rutting season for the elk. Through a whole bunch of tears and frustrations, she begins to discover what it really means to be brave, and that not getting what you want forces you to realize what you already have.

It’s interesting to re-read a book you read years ago, because not only do you get to see how the book itself holds up over time—or sometimes how it doesn’t—but you get to see the ways you yourself have changed. When I read the book the first time, I thoroughly enjoyed it, and at the



same time I remember being frustrated by how if everyone said that they were really thinking—if they laid their cards on the table, so to speak—so much confusion and heartbreak could have been avoided. The miscommunications struck me as unrealistic.

[5:42]

On this more recent reading though, I didn't feel that way at all; instead of feeling unrealistic, I thought Center captured how the ways we try to protect ourselves too often backfire, and how much harm we do others when we try to protect them.

Brené Brown—the research professor who studies courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy, and whose motto is “courage over comfort”—well, if she wrote *fiction*, it would look like this.

[MUSIC]

The crossed wires in *Happiness for Beginners* didn't strike me as a plot device this time—though they *do* move the plot forward—but as a faithful illustration of the damage we do when we don't summon the courage to tell the people who matter to us what we really think, how we really feel, what we really want.

In this story we get to know Helen best, and then Jake, but even the minor characters are great. I'm especially fond of Helen's feisty Grandmother GiGi. She's 86, still living on her own in Evanston, a member of an x-rated book club—and at one point she laments the character development in the club's current read is sorely lacking. I would read a whole book about GiGi.

*Happiness for Beginners* is ultimately the story of a woman whose life has fallen apart, and how she finds a way to put it together again. It's no spoiler to tell you that she succeeds: when you pick up a Katherine Center novel, that's what you sign on for.

In short, if you're looking for a book that *feels* fun and light and breezy while still managing to tackle serious topics, and explores the ways we mess each other up and help heal each other, and also has cute guys and, well, kissing, *Happiness for Beginners* may be the next great book you're looking for.



[7:27]

Readers, visit [modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook](https://modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook), O-N-E, onegreatbook to learn more about *Happiness for Beginners* and all of the great books in this volume. There's another great book coming next week. If you haven't subscribed yet do that on Spotify, Apple podcast, or Overcast. And if you *are* already subscribed would you do me a favor and recommend One Great Book? In Overcast that's as easy as clicking the star and on Apple and Google podcasts just choosing a star rating. Thanks so much, it really does help other people find the show.

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I'd love to hear what you think about *Happiness for Beginners* on Twitter or Instagram @AnneBogel that's Anne with an E, B as in books, O-G-E-L. You can also find me on Instagram @WhatShouldIReadNext.

Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.



And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, “ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading.”

Happy reading, everyone.