

The pursuit of happiness

Helen Elliott

on the rough music of novelist Patrick Gale

Women know that men who love their mothers make the best husbands. It is one of those universal truths that a child who has had a loving relationship with their mother will have a greater susceptibility to happiness as an adult.

British novelist Patrick Gale (38, nine novels, one collection of short stories) is fascinated by all the subtleties and shadings surrounding that single idea of "happiness". And his latest novel, *Rough Music*, in many ways his most autobiographical novel, takes the idea of happiness through two generations. It is also a reflection on the splendour and pain of childhood — those years when we take happiness for granted.

"I was boasting, I think, at a dinner table about happiness because, in my circle I'm notoriously happy and I noticed people were rounding on me. It set me wondering — particularly as there was a psychiatrist there who said: 'You've got no business being happy with the things that have happened to you.' And that pulled me up short."

As it would. Forget mere unhappiness. When Gale inquired further, there was a long list of things that should have caused trauma. His mother had an immense stroke when he was a child, there was a major car accident involving Patrick and his mother, his sister tried to kill herself, one brother died, his mother had two babies that died. More than enough for one life.

At around the same time as he was challenged about his notion of "happiness", he happened to catch a television documentary about a psychiatrist who has developed a technique to teach "happiness" at an Oxford clinic.

"I started thinking: What is happiness? Is it a learned thing, is it a delusion? Is it bought at the expense of wilfully forgetting bad things in your past or is it that you just learn to cope with them in a different way? And off the back of that I got to thinking about my parents' marriage."

Ah, family. All novelists have one great theme and Patrick Gale's is undoubtedly "family". *Rough Music* can be read as a more profound and perhaps more sombre meditation on the theme that has lingered from the very beginning. "Family is always in there somewhere," he says. His last novel, *Tree Surgery for Beginners*, was initiated by the breakdown of his brother's long marriage.

Not that this should imply any indelicacy, any rude snuffing in the lives of people who are deeply loved. Like Armistead Maupin, the North American novelist who is a great friend of Gale's — Gale recently wrote a brief biography of him — Gale takes the emotional truths of his own life and those of his friends and family and fictionalises from there.

Although given his factual background improvisation is hardly required. His father was the governor of Wandsworth prison when the most famous robber in the world, Ronnie Biggs, was about to become the most famous escapee in the world. Gale was just a child but he remembers the kerfuffle very well and some of the real events have been placed directly into the pages of *Rough Music*.

To a novelist, being admitted to the view from the inside of your parents' marriage might suggest irresistible temptation. But how do you write about the marriage of people who are still very much alive? And who read your books? His mother has read *Rough Music* four times, although his father has yet to pick it up.

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"My parents have an amazingly enduring marriage. They're not a couple who are conventionally in love, I don't think they have ever been in love. They're wildly disparate personalities. But with the last of us leaving home I think they've achieved some kind of equilibrium. In a way this should be the best years of their marriage."

Starting to write from a child's perspective, it didn't take long to see that he simply couldn't write about his parents' marriage, although he has certainly taken their characters and given them a different script. His mother, he

laughs, is as jealous as hell of Frances, the mother in *Rough Music*, who has all the fun that she never had. But there are always prices to pay for transgressions. (The title itself is a reference to the traditional punishment dished out to those who transgressed sexually.)

"We had to do this terrifying interview the other day [in the UK] where my mother and I were interviewed separately and asked questions about one another. I don't know exactly what she said about me — here you are at 38 learning what your mother thinks about you for the first time! — but I gather she's hugely embarrassed about me writing on what she considers forbidden subjects — bedroom subjects, she would call them. At the same time she happily admits to being jealous of the women in my books because she says they've made her very aware of what a constrained life she's led. I do think it sad. She was a good girl, terribly innocent."

What intrigues the new generation is that there ever could be such innocence. Gale mentions, with evident pain, that such innocence in both parties circumscribed two lives.

"When they came back from their honeymoon, they were both still virgins. Well, my mother

certainly was and it wasn't as if they'd tried and failed, it was that they couldn't begin to get over the sheer embarrassment of being married."

Because Gale and his mother are so close she is aware of the great difference between the way she has lived her life and the way her youngest — gay — son has lived his.

"She's very aware from my writing that I've lived a sensual life but I think that's a very

heterosexual-homosexual phenomenon . . . the way gay men discover themselves certainly tends to involve a lot of sexual adventures and explorations and quite often their female friends will say they're envious. I actually think that there is some truth in the idea that the more adventures and the more choice you have, the harder it is to settle down — there are more points of comparison in your head. If you marry as a virgin, you have a greater chance of happiness because you're not going to be saying in your head the one that got away is a better lay than this one."

A few of the endless variations and idiosyncrasies of human sexual behaviour are intimately disclosed in *Rough Music*, but perhaps the most startling is the sexual relationship between the male narrator and his brother-in-law, a happily married doctor.

The candid Mr Gale says that women are "terrifically naive" about assessing the straightness of the men in their lives.

"As are straight men, it has to be said. There is an incredibly large grey area and the labels are most unhelpful."

Again, when he writes of the married man with a male lover, Gale is writing out of personal experience. He relates the oddity of a love affair he had — "obsessive on both sides" — with a married man in the cavalry: "Even as we were in bed he would still be

referring to himself as completely straight. Not even bisexual. When I first met him he was just engaged and I thought I could save him from this lie but of course he pursued the lie and got married, had a wife and children in the country and kept the place in town. It's staggering to me that someone could be so self-deceiving. And I'm sure his wife was completely fooled as well."

Although Gale is only too well aware that if you tell these stories as a gay man, everyone will say that it's just wishful thinking and that he wants the world to be gay.

"Of course I'm not saying the world is gay. I'm saying that a lot of men will eagerly go to bed with a man provided it doesn't change their label."

We have to finish because the author is about to do a reading at a bookshop. He's endearingly modest and assumes that no-one will turn up, a quite crazy assumption given the accolades he's been receiving from his rapidly growing readership. But there is just one more thing, his father. His mother, his wonderful lively mother, drops constantly and naturally into his conversation but not his father.

Yet the father in *Rough Music* is compelling in his kindness and reticence.

"My father?" He pauses — unusually. "Oh, the character in the book is somebody I hope my father is. My father is emotionally such a mystery and none of us will ever know who my father is — and he's 82 now and terribly deaf. Although I dream that in his desk — which is incredibly untidy — that after he dies I'll go into it and find a journal or something, but I fear not . . . I love him to bits but he's a hard nut to crack."

"It's a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon phenomenon that men like that will carry a torch for their wives all their lives and it will never really show. Or if it shows it does so in these terrible muted gestures. They get judged very badly by the therapy generation for being undemonstrative but by their own lights they're still very loving."

Indeed.

* *Rough Music*. By Patrick Gale. Flamingo. \$27.50.

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