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BOOKS

## LIKE HAPPINESS AUTHOR URSULA VILLARREAL-MOURA ON UNTOLD STORIES AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF POWER DYNAMICS



CELADON BOOKS SAT DOWN WITH URSULA VILLARREAL-MOURA TO DISCUSS *LIKE HAPPINESS*, HER SEARING DEBUT NOVEL ABOUT THE NUANCES AND COMPLEXITIES OF GENDER, POWER, AND FAME.

**Congratulations on writing *Like Happiness*, an incredible debut novel! Why did you think this story of the imbalanced relationship between Tatum, a young Latinx woman, and M. Domínguez, a rising literary star, was an important one to tell?**

I wanted to tell the story of a woman who sometimes wasn't even the main character of her own life. I think it's an idea that might resonate with other women of color: We live in a society that values men over women, children over mothers, and white people over people of color. Through fiction, I wanted to explore how that sort of hierarchy devalues women of color and how that shapes a life.

***Like Happiness* will appeal to fans of *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell and**

***Luster* by Raven Leilani. How is this novel different from others that deal with similar themes?**

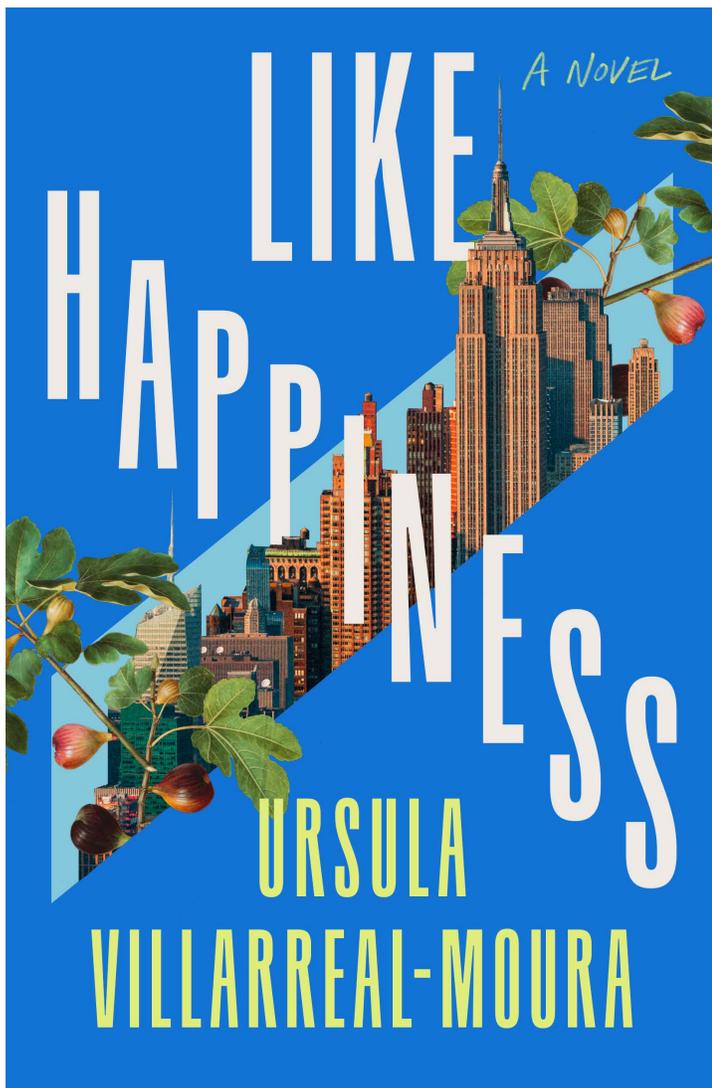
I consider myself fairly well read, but I don't know of many novels that tackle these power imbalances from the perspective of a Latina. Typically in contemporary fiction, Latinas are stereotyped as outspoken, sassy, and assertive. I wanted to tell a story about a Latina who is quieter and more observant. That's not a story that gets shared often.

**The relationship described in *Like Happiness* is complex, vacillating between a celebrity-fan dynamic, friendship, and almost something more. It's not, however, a story of overt sexual predation, like those that have been brought to the forefront of our cultural**

**awareness over the last several years. Why did you decide to place this story in a complicated, gray area?**

Relationships in which people have no inkling that they're being manipulated or abused fascinate me. I'm also deeply obsessed with delusion. When a dynamic is imbalanced by age or power, it's sometimes hard for the people in the relationship to know something is fundamentally wrong. In *Like Happiness*, Tatum is unaware for years that her proverbial house is on fire. She's lived so long in a toxic relationship that nothing seems glaringly wrong or morally reprehensible to her. To me, that is a far more complex and satisfying story than one of overt abuse.

**Liberal arts colleges are often put on a pedestal as inclusive,**



**progressive spaces, but we see how isolating and exclusionary the experience was for Tatum. How do you think this aspect of her education shaped her story?**

Tatum's isolated New England college experience absolutely led her to write the fan letter that changed her life. Throughout the novel, Tatum finds that she's just a smidge too different from those around her. Sometimes

the divisive factor is her socioeconomic status, sometimes her race, or the fact that she doesn't want to partake in drugs. This constant othering happens even at liberal arts schools, a place where she was tolerated but never welcomed.

**We learn early in the book that Tatum is in a long-term romantic partnership with a woman. How does her queer relationship further complicate the power dynamics in her relationship with M.**

**and shape her identity throughout her story?**

The default aspiration when Tatum was coming of age was that every young girl would ultimately grow up to marry a successful man. I was interested in depicting the pursuit of that scenario and many of the ways it can go awry. For one, it assumes every woman is heterosexual, which Tatum is not. That specific aspiration also doesn't leave much room for a woman's personal development or success. Throughout the novel, Tatum keeps thinking that the time isn't quite right for Mateo and her. The reasons she gives vary, including a lack of maturity on her part. But actually, she's pursuing another woman's dream — a straight woman's dream instead of her own.

**Much of the story is told in a letter written by Tatum to M. Why did you choose to write the book this way?**

First and second person are so intimate. I was drawn to the intimacy of having a conversation, but a conversation in which a woman's voice and perspective is the most important. That led me to the second person.

**As both a reader and author, what do you think are the most interesting stories being told right now?**

Currently, we're living in a renaissance of Native and Latinx writing. Years ago, I was blown away by Tommy Orange's novel *There There*, and I'm looking forward to the sequel in March 2024. I love Stephen Graham Jones's thrillers, such as *The Only Good Indians*. Fernanda Melchor is writing fascinating books that are thankfully being translated from Spanish into English. I'm also a huge fan of Angie Cruz's writing. I love books that make me laugh, and her novel *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water* is structurally brilliant and humorous.

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