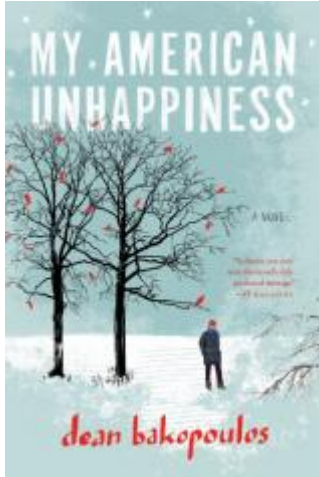


My American Unhappiness

by Dean Bakopoulos



About the Book

“Why are you so unhappy?” That’s the question that Zeke Pappas, a thirty-three-year-old scholar, asks almost everybody he meets as part of an obsessive project, “The Inventory of American Unhappiness.” The answers he receives—a mix of true sadness and absurd complaint—create a collage of woe. Zeke, meanwhile, remains delightfully oblivious to the increasingly harsh realities that threaten his daily routine, opting instead to focus his energy on finding the perfect mate so that he can gain custody of his orphaned nieces. Following steps outlined in a women’s magazine, the ever-optimistic Zeke identifies some “prospects”: a newly divorced neighbor, a coffeehouse barista, his administrative assistant, and Sofia Coppola (“Why not aim high?”).

A clairvoyant when it comes to the Starbucks orders of strangers, a quixotic renegade when it comes to the federal bureaucracy, and a devoted believer in the afternoon cocktail and the evening binge, Zeke has an irreverent voice that is a marvel of lacerating wit and heart-on-sleeve emotion, underscored by a creeping paranoia and made more urgent by the hope that if he can only find a wife, he might have a second chance at life.

Discussion Guide

1. Zeke’s story, though universal in its sense of loss and loneliness, is woven tightly into the experience of midwestern Americans during the post-9/11 “Dubya” years. What kinds of cues does the author use to create a sense of time and place in the novel? Do you think it would have worked equally well set in another part of the country, or in another era?
2. Zeke muses, “Everybody seems happy through a window” (p. 30). Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment? Discuss how the novel offers a different kind of window through which to view the characters’ happiness or unhappiness. When the novel opens, does Zeke seem happy or unhappy? In what ways is the novel his own answer to his question, “Why are you so unhappy?”
3. Compare and contrast the battle waged by Zeke’s brother Cougar who fought and died in the post-9/11 invasion of Iraq, with Zeke’s anti-war protests and his work in the humanities. Do you think it’s fair to say that both brothers are fighting for something important, an ideal, or a way of life? What do you make of Zeke’s definition of and distinction between art and the humanities on page 139?
4. “The Starbucks Challenge” is a small ritual Zeke enacts daily both for Minn’s entertainment and perhaps to mitigate his own increasing unhappiness. Identify and discuss other ways that characters in the novel seek to alleviate their unhappiness, if only briefly.

5. Does Zeke's description of the American condition on pages 45–47 strike you as familiar, or is Zeke, as his assistant Lara suggests, just convincing his subjects (and you the reader) of their unhappiness? Do you think the very act of asking, "Why are you so unhappy?" can influence a response so profoundly as to turn a positive outlook into a negative one? Why or why not?

6. Why aren't Mack and Joseph excited about Zeke's announcement that he's getting married? Do you think the pronouncement would have been received differently if Zeke were a woman, given that the advice he's following comes from a women's magazine? Do you think it's more socially acceptable for a woman to be on the hunt for a mate? Identify other ways that Zeke's character defies stereotypes of the midwestern male in this novel.

7. When Zeke's mother has to choose whether to make her son happy or do what's best for her granddaughters, April and May, she decides she should get custody of the girls. How do you feel about her decision? What would you do?

8. *My American Unhappiness* in some ways seeks to illuminate the nation's post-9/11 malaise, a temporary insanity and depression that affected people more deeply, Zeke might argue, than they're even aware. On a microcosmic level, Zeke's family suffers a post-9/11 transformation as well with the death of his father, brother, and wife all within a short period of time following the attacks. Discuss how Zeke's sense of identity is influenced by his nuclear family (parents and brother) and compare and contrast that to his role in his post-9/11 family (mother and nieces).

9. Valerie, Zeke's missing and presumed-dead wife, haunts more than half the novel before reappearing. How much of this incident has affected Zeke's ability to pursue and maintain a relationship in his post-Valerie life? What else might be holding him back from asking out Minn, Lara, or Elizabeth prior to his mother's ultimatum?

10. Pages 249–250 contain a kind of rant about Zeke's frustration that Americans are only interested in the story of themselves. Discuss his diatribe in the context of his misguided attempts to connect with the women in his life. Additionally, what do you make of the chapter titles in light of this criticism?

11. The last scene of the novel leaves the reader, literally, with a ray of hope. What meaning do you think the author intended for you to take away from this ending? Was it enough to lift the mood of the novel, which essentially spirals downward as Zeke's life and rationality fall apart?

12. What would your response to "Why are you so unhappy?" be? Try writing an answer as though you were responding on the project's website and then share these with each other.

Author Bio

Author of the award-winning debut **Please Don't Come Back from the Moon** and the recipient of Guggenheim and NEA fellowships, Dean Bakopoulos is currently a visiting professor of English at Grinnell College.

Critical Praise

"*My American Unhappiness* effectively mixes dark humor with a zany momentum that draws the reader deeper into the book . . . very funny . . . Bakopoulos proves his skill as a storyteller."—*Dallas Morning News*

"A fresh-spirited, timely satire . . . *My American Unhappiness* is a novel of First World problems, but it's so in touch with that state of privilege that it won't abide taking it all, or itself, too seriously . . . Far and away, the book's best asset is its deft consideration of satire, one that isn't bunkered down with an egoist's judgmental take on what ails us. Instead, this novel grabs at the problems and roughhouses with them a bit, for sport and affection. It's the ultimate Midwestern act of tough love, as if the setting and its inherent values have penetrated the book's core."—*Los Angeles Times*

"[Zeke] is a perfectly imperfect avatar of the the 2000s decade . . . Bakopoulos often provides his first-person narrator with long passages of cultural analysis that are simultaneously insightful and preposterous, transcendent and banal, mystical and pedestrian."—*Iowa City Press Citizen*

"Hilarious and heartfelt . . . This funny-sad novel seems to take elements of the author's own life (happily married, with kids) and twists them in a funhouse mirror—with delightful results." —NPR.org, Indie Booksellers Target Summer's Best Reads

"[Bakopoulos is] working here in a new, hypomanic prose style; the jokes come fast and furious, and the steady narration of the previous novel has given way to a wry, edgy self-mockery . . . a winning distraction, a smart entertainment for smart guys . . . There's enough originality and earnestness here, and in his previous book, to suggest the possibility of great future success." —J. Robert Lennon, *New York Times Book Review*

"So funny you may miss this novel's slyly profound message." —Oprah.com BookFinder

"[*My American Unhappiness*] shimmers with mischief and offbeat charm . . . a dark entertainment infused by a bluesy yearning for a better America."--*Kirkus Reviews*

"Bakopoulos writes with great heart and a cold eye, and his limpid, ironic prose will appeal to those who like the early work of Martin Amis." --*Library Journal*

"*My American Unhappiness* is a smart, funny, charming novel -- an incisive critique of the way we live now, but armed, unlike most contemporary satire, with a big, generous heart. I got addicted to the misadventures of Zeke Pappas. I didn't want the book to end." -- Dan Chaon, *Await Your Reply*

"If the nature of despair, as Kierkegaard wrote, is to be unaware of itself, then Zeke Pappas is its perfect spokesman: a blithely deluded nebbish whose epic longings -- to document the emptiness at the center of American life and to win the heart of Sofia Coppola and/or his local Starbucks barista -- propel him into ever more twisted predicaments. There's no such thing as unhappiness when you're holding a Dean Bakopoulos novel in your hands."-- Jonathan Miles, *Dear American Airlines*

"Vivid as a searchlight gliding across suburban picture windows , MY AMERICAN UNHAPPINESS displays its author's saddened comic wisdom, as apparently self-effacing as it is marvelously inventive and observant. Dean Bak"Vivid as a searchlight gliding across suburban picture windows , MY AMERICAN UNHAPPINESS displays its author's saddened comic wisdom, as apparently self-effacing as it is marvelously inventive and observant. Dean Bakopoulos is a writer to watch, a novelist to cherish."-- Peter Straub, *A Dark Matter*

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