

John Fraser has lived in Rome since 1980. Previously, he worked in England and Canada.

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John Fraser's latest work of fiction, **Happy Always** concerns two journeys. In *Here and Back Again*, the young narrator escapes from his isolated village, lives poor in Paris, is involved in marginal schemes which bring him close to a police unit. The unit is disgraced – his fault – and he turns to new friends – one, a musician, promotes avant garde mass concerts in Africa, another sends him to a remote part of Russia. Here, he is to supervise an imported jungle installation. He tries, and fails, in an attempt to trek back to humanity's origins in Africa, returns to Paris, working in a team of rickety mountebanks in the Métro.

In *Happy*, a young drifter serves as chauffeur to a wealthy boss, who is killed in a botched robbery, leaving the narrator independent – teaching English and living by expedients among market traders. The latter go their separate, fatal ways. After some vicissitudes, he follows the pursuit of happiness, his outstanding quality, and takes a voyage on a pleasure boat. Its lady captain becomes his lover, but passes on to him a fatal illness. He remains happy.

The questions raised give substance to these extravagant tales. The epigraph asks: what is human culture? Does it change through time, or is it always rooted in our species, the animal within? Do individuals begin in personal circumstance, or are they bound to a quest for species consciousness? Does culture lead, or follow, and does humanity possess a set of rules, or laws? How do we recognise our animality, in relation to other animals, and how do we treat and see them? When we die – what do we leave behind? In the end the quest seems circular.

'Fraser's work is conceived on a heroic scale in terms of its ideas and its situational metaphors. If he were to be filmed, it would need the combined talents of a Buñuel, a Gilliam, a Cameron. Like Thomas Pynchon, whom in some ways he resembles, Fraser is a deep and serious fantasist, wildly inventive. The reader rides as on a switchback

or luge of impetuous attention, with effects flashing by at virtuoso speeds. The characters seem to be unwitting agents of chaos, however much wise reflection the author bestows upon them. They moves with shrugging self-assurance through circumstances as richly detailed and as without reliable compass-points as a Chinese scroll. I am convinced that he is the most original novelist of our time. His work has become an internal dialogue of intuitions and counter-intuitions that just happens to take the form of conversations between inscrutable characters. But really it is a rich texture of poetic perceptions, frequently reaching for the aphoristic, but rooted in sidelong debate and weird analogies. I class him as a latter-day surrealist. The things I like about his work are always rooted in wit. And of course the pure invention.' *John Fuller*



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Front cover: 'Lame Bear'
Yu. A. Vasnetsov (1964).

HAPPY ALWAYS JOHN FRASER

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Modern
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'the most original novelist of our time'

*John Fuller, Whitbread Award
winner and Booker Prize nominee*

HAPPY
ALWAYS

JOHN
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'This is the moment for some becoming immortal. Some go to hell. Others qualify for paradise. Mostly – it's transforming into places and objects, passing reluctant into other people's heads, and all the blur and shimmer that entails. Find the right mode! It's my moment! Music! A play of light! Birth and death – they say those are unimportant – screwing, pay packets: those are supposed to be revealing moments. Crap! This is my most important day . . .' He leaps up off the bed, his catafalque, and runs off down the street. 'You lie!' he shouts at two types in black, holding the secret. 'In the universe, the needle's stuck – "no change". It isn't made of anything at all. It's an exploded void. Nought banging into nought.'

'Then, Sandrine,' I say, 'what can you do? Your blue birds fly away. They can't be caught. Can you protect us from our loss? From all the loss? Unknown people with an unknown plan – sweeping us away. Maybe they'll find a guy to make apologies. Another generation hears, amazed. Live people – that's what we know, all we know, that's kin to us . . . not the ruins, the old symphonies, the tomes. But our lookalikes, brothers and sisters, comrades, here they are beside us – then, they spin and drift – and disappear. People – they fade away – like captains tumbling from a spaceship. No air, no gravity – a "help" won't carry. It just fills your baggy suit. There is no help, no hand. Another project, that's the most to hope. Sandrine, it must be why you're here.'

'Find me a rock, dear Sissi,' I implore. 'And let me off.'

'There is no "off",' she says, 'unless you are a fish. But no: I caught you, landsman. You're out of your element – but there's not another one for you. This is my realm, this in-between, this nothing-nowhere, this voyaging from port to port, harbourless, import to export – where you're a good that never lands, that has no customs, just some songs that only sailors sing. Lookout. That's what you are – Look out!' she screams . . . A wave has doused poor Ondine, down we go – past the happy grinning skulls – always happy them! – into the land of fantasy – the tentacles, the worms, the mouths that chew on nothing without end, no appetite, no satisfaction and no sound – then eaten in their turn, reproduced in shell-less eggs, lighting up or going black – one evil eye awake and seeking out its lunch . . .

from *Happy Always*