Change the Story: Reading *Matilda* as a revolt against the acceptable gendered behaviours and narrative expectations of Cinderella.

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In the Company of Cinderella[1]

I remember tutoring a young teenager a few years ago, and discussing with her the difference between *plot* and *theme.* She was struggling to understand this in relation to her set text, so I suggested we work with a common story, like a fairy tale, say, Cinderella. I asked her to tell me what happens in the story. She gave a comprehensive summary of the girl who is made to do the cleaning, her ugly step sisters, the ball, the fairy godmother, the glass slippers, the prince, the shoe fitting. And, of course, Cinderella and the Prince marrying and living happily ever-after.

"Great, that is the plot" I said. "To think about the theme we might ask, 'what is it about?' Or, 'Are there any take-home messages?'" She thought on it for a minute, and then, without a trace of irony or bitterness, because she was twelve, she said, "be good, work hard, get married."

In this paper I explore how the concept of the marriage narrative, as summarised above by a 12 year old girl, and an idea of happiness-via-marriage, that is if you do these things you will be happy. It is because the marriage narrative is most often thought of as belonging to fairy-tale characters like Cinderella and Snow-white; good girls working hard, dutifully and quietly, often undervalued, and waiting for the day the Prince comes and saves them from a life of drudgery, that I am particularly interested in how this narrative can shape and limit the lives girls and women imagine for themselves. We know that for many people a marriage or marriage like-relationship doesn't always bring happiness, and deep down many of us are actually very happy without marrying anyone, perhaps even without dating anyone. So why do we (usually – but not exclusively – girls and women) want our lives to echo Cinderella's? Why do we want her glass slipper to fit, and what are we to do if, try as we might, we get no joy out of trying to squeeze ourselves into that shoe? Aren't there any other shoes for us?

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[1] When I did my reading on marriage and happiness for my Master of Research Thesis, I was surprised at how often Cinderella turned up, especially in texts about trends weddings, such as Rebecca Mead's 2007 book *One Perfect Day*. But then, the happiness-via-marriage script is essentially *her* story. She is, it turns out, a great money maker for Walt Disney Weddings, (yes, they are a thing!). Mead (2007) reported that "Cinderella's coach, the rental of which costs twenty-five hundred dollars per ceremony, is one of the most coveted items available through Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons program" (2007, p68). Cynically, Mead continues, "Whether there is any sense in which a Cinderella-themed wedding can be anything other than juvenile is a good question, but the larger fantasy that it draws on – that every bride on her wedding day is a princess – is a wide spread one" (p72-73). Cinderella perhaps is the image of *happily ever-after*, but she is also the "persecuted heroine who *cannot* take charge of her life and who needs the help of magic powers and men to bring her happiness in the form of marriage" (Zipes, 2011, p180). As we proceed, we would, perhaps, be wise not to forget that.

This paper will seek to find answers to these questions by demonstrating that aspects of *Cinderella* are present in Matilda's story, but that the implied narrative outcomes are rejected, making revolt against stereotyped gendered behaviour and expectation possible. *Matilda* (1988) may not, at first glance, be an obvious reversion of the Cinderella narrative, or even a story belonging to the fairy tale genre, but a close reading of Dahl's novel and the Royal Shakespeare Company's stage adaptation, *Matilda the Musical*, reveals that key elements of the genre and motifs central to *Cinderella* are present, and subsequently challenged, in *Matilda*.

To answer these questions, I reflect on how fairy tales can operate as a roadmap for life, offering children gendered paths. I then outline the key aspects of the gendered path in stories such as *Cinderlla* which are informed by a happiness-via-marriage narrative. Tracing key aspects of feminist critique of marriage narratives, I look at how an idea of happiness-via-marriage works to shape the expectations of children, particularly girl-children. I then consider how a story like *Matilda* (1988), which of course isn't perfect either, can encourage us to change the stories we tell, so that we can also change the lives that we live. Fairy Tale scholar Jack Zipes, advocates subversive storytelling, by teaching children to question stories by playing 'what if' with the text. For example, simply asking *what if Cinderella didn't marry a prince* helps us to think about alternative stories. Zipes suggests that "different tales, from 'Cinderella' to 'Rumpelstiltskin', can be told to children and then changed in an effort to liberate them from detrimental socialization" (2016, 279). Following Zipes I want us to think along the lines of *what happens if Cinderella was naughty, if she didn't marry, if she was happier that way?* When *Matilda* is read as a new version of an old story, some possible answers to these questions emerge. Consequently, *Matilda* can help us to see that it is possible to rewrite the gendered scripts that teach us how to be in the world, particularly, those scripts that teach girls how to be happy.

Fairy Tales as Roadmaps to Happily Ever-After

Cristina Bacchilega (2013) argues that while fairy tales have many genre markers, purposes and outcomes, two of the central aspects of fairy tales are wish fulfilment and the transmission of sociocultural lessons. That is, they teach readers how to be and behave. As is the case with both *Cinderella* and *Matilda,* fairy tales can “promote a sense of justice by narrating the success of unpromisingly small, poor or otherwise oppressed protagonists” with “the universalizing of ‘happily ever after' as the signature mark of the fairy tale” (Bacchilega: 2013:4-5). Traditional fairy tales, such as *Cinderella*, “offer sexually stereotyped pathways for boys and girls” (Stephens &McCallum: 2013:204), are “central to reproducing ingrained or second nature habits” (Bacchliega: 2015:4), and are “sites for the construction of appropriate gendered behaviour” (Parsons:2004: 135), valuing feminine passivity and the goal of marriage. It is against this, that Matilda, “the archetypal oppressed child hero of the fairy tale” (Pope & Round: 2015:257), emerges as “a postmodern kind of hero” who “can occasionally misbehave” (Pope & Round: 271), a new protagonist of a new story, which though still a story of good overcoming evil, is a story which revolts against key elements of *Cinderella*, particularly the inevitability marriage narrative, and the happiness-via-marriage script, presenting the possibility for girls to think outside the limitations this script. Before we think about Matilda resisting an expected narrative, and casting aside a limiting script, we must clarify what this narrative and script are, and how they work, that is, why do we desire to walk in Cinderella’s shoes even when they don’t fit?

Why we desire the Glass Slipper

Writing of the instructive and formative quality of stories, socio-narratologist Arthur Frank argues that:

> Stories most evidently teach us what counts as good and bad by linking character’s actions to consequences that listeners *feel* are good or bad. Children need not be told explicitly that Cinderella’s step mother is acting badly or that Cinderella’s marrying the prince is good. Good and bad are embodied feelings experienced before they can be learned as moral principles” (2010, p36).

The happiness-via-marriage script works in this way. We are encouraged to respond to the weddings of others with happiness, and long for our own as the bringer of happiness. In thinking about the obvious places the happiness-via-marriage script is adhered to, we might call to mind classic fairy tales, novels with a romance plot or Hollywood *romcom* films. Queer theorist, J Jack Halberstam has described the white wedding as “the ‘cum shot’ of the romantic comedy” (2012, p115). In these types of texts, we learn that for a girl to be a good girl, she should be well behaved, morally virtuous and hardworking, so that she will eventually be rewarded with marriage. This marriage, we are to believe, will secure her a good and happy future, free of the obstacles of the past. Audiences learn to align themselves with the heroine in longing for marriage, as broken or painful childhoods will surely be redeemed through the arrival of the prince, domestic bliss and the promise of happily ever after. Someday, sings Snow White, the prince will come, and how happy that moment will be.

According to the marriage narrative, good girls are rewarded with marriage, and marriage in turn is the start of a new and happy life. Halberstam (2012) explains that because we continually retell standard romance stories, young girls learn to desire to be the good, popular, married woman, who lives in safe, static, middle class comfort. As a society we, “lead young girls in particular to believe that they will be swept along from one life defining event to another – that love leads to marriage, marriage to babies, babies to family contentment, and that once in the shelter of family, life will be sweet, simple and fulfilling” (Halberstam, 2012, p111). We don’t just learn this in fiction; the influential Evangelical Christian preacher and writer, Timothy Keller, has suggested that, “Marriage has unique power to show us the truth of who we really are. Marriage has a unique power to redeem our past and heal our self-image through love” (2011, p167). Marriage then, is held out, as a goal to aim for. Just as it did for Cinderella, marriage is the event which can redeem or erase the pain, injustices and insecurities of our past, offering a fresh start to life, in which future happiness is supposedly secured. The wedding, usually a traditional white, church wedding, becomes a powerful symbol of life done the right way up to that point, and it acts as a guarantee that it will continue to go well, or happily, ever-after. The marriage narrative, and the happiness script which underwrites it, close off other ways of being in the world, as they are deemed unhappy and less worthwhile. This is at best limiting, and at worst, oppressive.

Opposition to the Marriage Narrative

Opposition to the marriage narrative, of course, isn't new. It was 1980 when Adrienne Rich wrote of compulsory heterosexuality and lamented that so rarely in the stories we tell is "the question ever raised as to whether, in a different context … women would *choose* heterosexual coupling and marriage." (2003, p13). Compulsory heterosexuality makes heterosexual marriage not simply the 'right' choice, it works to erase other choices, so that marriage is the only visible and legitimate option. Compulsory heterosexuality directs us to see that the 'right' expression of desire and sexuality is in the roles of husband and wife, and the gendered roles these married identities have been traditionally used to create and uphold.

Jaclyn Geller (2001) has offered a more recent mapping of this less-than-happy social history of marriage as an institution, outlining how marriage has historically been both a source of oppression for women, as well as being the only path possible for a woman to travel should she wish to maintain, or gain, social, moral, and economic respectability and stability. Geller considers that while marriage might once have been a financial necessity for women, today, the significant social and political gains that have been made by women collectively, make "matrimony's continuing allure" a mystery (2001, p13). Geller takes an active stance against marriage, saying "not all choices are 'valid' merely because sane individuals make them" (p70), and that to this end, we should not accept marriage as valid. Rather, if we align with Geller we would see

> that marriage is destructive because it perpetuates negative hierarchical divisions such as the celebration of wives and the accompanying denigration of spinsters, the artificial distinction between good (sexually monogamous) and bad (sexually experimental) girls, the exaltation of conjugal love over platonic friendship and the privileging of institutionalized togetherness over solitude (p70).

Geller comes to this conclusion based on the social history of marriage as an oppressive institution, "tainted by the historical residue of female subordination" (p71). She argues that contemporary weddings cannot escape being part of this history, and that the continued pursuit of this kind of sanctioned togetherness, as the most desirable state, makes other expressions of sexuality, other modes of being in relationship, as well as being alone, seem less valid, less fulfilling and necessarily less happy. We only have to think of the fear that is contained in the common expression "I don't want to end up sad and alone", which equates being unmarried with sadness and loneliness rather than allowing a person to see solitude as one potentially rewarding state of being, in a spectrum of possibilities. Being unmarried is a *different* life, with different possibilities, not a less valid one. I'm not interested in declaring what kind of life is *better*, rather, we should move towards finding multiple ways to be in the world, knowing our lives may be happy or unhappy, regardless of relationship and financial status.

Leena-Maija Rossi (2011) helpfully reminds us that "taking an analytical look at normatively 'happy' or felicitous performatives of heterosexuality does not, of course mean that heterosexuality should not be reiterated or that people should not reproduce or be happy in their heterosexual relationships" (2011, p17). Making room for those who do not marry, who are child-free, who may not be heterosexual, allowing them (us) to walk through the world in supportive friendships and relationships, experiencing intimacy and belonging, living lives that are recognised as valuable, does not mean that no one should marry, or that those who are married should not seek to build and maintain a joyful marriage. Despite sustained feminist and queer critique of marriage itself, and the widespread popularity of marriage narratives, decades after Rubin and Rich wrote of the pervasive and memetic nature of the marriage narrative in popular culture, the narrative remains a perplexingly popular trope. Geller (2001) writes that the sustained appeal of marriage is a mystery, and Heather Love points out that "marriage does not need to deliver on its promise of happiness to keep people coming back for more – fantasies of future happiness will do the job." (2007, p53). Additionally, "despite a long history of criticism and ample evidence of marriage's failures, it remains the golden fleece of romantic fulfilment." (ibid). Halberstam reminds readers that "best-selling books are still telling women how to get men and how to marry them" (2012, p67), while Roxane Gay confessed "I enjoy fairy tales because I need to believe, despite my cynicism, that there is a happy ending for everyone, especially for me" (2014, p192). Something about this fantasy of marriage, as the key to a promised happy future, sticks with us, even if we, like Roxane Gay, are cynical about the reality of such a promise.

Promising Happiness: Why Marriage Narratives are still Appealing and Compelling

Ahmed's work on happiness adds an important layer to understanding the memetic nature of marriage narrative, as it provides a clear rationale for its endurance and popularity, despite its inherent sexism. Ahmed argues that the goal, or promise, of future happiness which is attached to marriage and family is what makes the pursuit of marriage and the happy family so compelling. Through Ahmed, we learn that the promise of future happiness creates happiness scripts which direct us toward certain choices, not simply because they are considered right, but because the pursuit and attainment of these things will make us happy. Most of us, like Gay, want or "need to believe" that happiness is in our reach (2014, p192).

A happiness script works to regulate behaviour by "providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy, whereby happiness is what follows being natural or good" (Ahmed, 2010, p59). Claire Colebrook has suggested that "the culture of happiness is a culture of worthiness, moral reward, active autonomy, self-formation, self-affirmation and narrative intelligibility" (2007, p97). The happiness-via-marriage script tells us happiness can be ours, if we follow the script, and live a 'normal' or 'good' life, focused on marriage and family.

The idea that happiness is what we will be rewarded with if we choose, desire and behave rightly – that is, if we marry and have a family – allows the marriage narrative to become a compelling script or template for life. More negatively, the threat of unhappiness may deter people from pursuing alternative modes of being (not marrying, not having children), as surely, we all want to live well and be happy. Normative paths of happiness via marriage, family or career are easy to follow as "the more people travel upon a path the clearer the path becomes" (Ahmed, 2017, p46). Arthur Frank (2010) argues that storytelling, in general, has the capacity to *do* things, saying the stories we tell and consume can both widen our field of vision and make us more empathetic, or by highlighting only certain narrative outcomes, stories can work to make a "particular perspective not only plausible but compelling." This can "limit people's sympathetic imagination" (2010, p32).

Marriage narratives, Hollywood Romcoms and fairy tales like *Cinderella,* which adhere to the formula set out by the happiness-via-marriage script, have this simultaneously limiting yet compelling effect. Consumers of the narrative learn to desire marriage specifically because it, and the comfortable life it apparently secures, is believed to bring happiness. Happiness comes to signify a wealth of desired life outcomes, such as financial security, an abundance of leisure time, wellness, and the love and comfort of a partner and children. All these things will be yours, we are told, if you live well, and core to living well is being married. This picture of happiness is limiting because other paths to happy which to do focus on replicating heteronormative patterns of life are excluded. When the majority of stories for children and women tell us that a normal life is one that seeks romantic fulfilment, and a happy life is one that is heterosexually, romantically fulfilled, it is very hard not to feel in some way a failure if you're not living this life. You might imagine everyone else is happy, or at least, on the way there, while you've been left behind somewhere. In imagining that others have reached destination happiness, and that you are wandering on the 'wrong' path, "you might be discouraged; you might try to find an easier route" (Ahmed:2017:46).

Instead of being discouraged, let's now return to *Cinderella* and *Matilda* and find encouragement to set aside the happiness-via-marriage script, and walk paths of our own choosing, making it possible for those around us who are also having a hard time fitting those glass slippers to cast them aside in order for better fitting shoes. In doing so we follow one of Sara Ahmed's key goals in critiquing happiness, and that is, we learn to "make room for life, to make room for possibility" (2010, p20).

What if Cinderella was Naughty, Is Matilda a new Cinderella?

To be considered a radically new version of *Cinderella,* motifs central to *Cinderella* must not merely be present in *Matilda,* they must also be challenged. Clearly, *Cinderella* follows to the happiness-via-marriage script, and celebrates the marriage narrative. As we have seen, this narrative "is so much a part of our being in the world that it is extremely difficult to read and write outside it" (Parsons: 2004: 141), and many modern retellings of *Cinderella* have only "a faux feminist touch" (Zipes: 2011:174), which allows Cinderella some agency, but leaves the marriage plot firmly in place, upholding normative heterosexual romance as the only truly happy and good outcome for girls. While acknowledging that there are several Cinderella source stories, the key elements of the dominant version - leaning heavily on Perrault's telling, "in large because it is the version on which the Disney (1950) animated movie was based" (Parsons: 2004: 143) - are: a young girl protagonist who is denied her rightful place in her family, abused by her step-mother, abandoned (either by death or neglect) by her father, suffers in silence, unable to change her situation, and is helped by outside forces, usually a magical fairy godmother. Vindicated as virtuous and beautiful, she is given the ultimate reward, a marriage which secures domestic comfort and the promise of happily ever after.

If we read *Matilda* as a reversion of the typical *Cinderella* story, we begin to see how it is possible, and important to tell new stories, or new versions of old stories, that we might make room for lives, and not require all people to follow gendered and heteronormative paths. Changing stories by telling new versions of old stories matters, as it allows us to see more options. Just as "the message of a classical fairy tale can be altered, so can one play with and alter one's own life" (Zipes, 2016, p280). From fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes (2016) we learn that we can play with stories and cultural scripts by playing a game of 'what if', and questioning elements of the plot and the narrative outcomes. When we play 'what if' with the happiness-via-marriage script, we create the space to question guaranteed future happiness as a good goal or motivation. What if we are unmarried and happy? What if we are unmarried and unhappy but that's ok? If we play this game with a story like *Cinderella* and ask 'what if Cinderella was naughty?' or 'what if Cinderella went to school and was really clever?' we might end of with a character like Dahl's Matilda.

Like Perrault's Cinderella whose ineffectual father stands by while her stepmother reduces her to less than a servant, Matilda's parents do not recognise her as brilliant or even acceptable, instead they reduce her to "nothing more than a scab" (Dahl: 1988: 4), and long to be rid of her. In Denis Kelly and Tim Minchin's stage adaptation, *Matilda the Musical* it clear Matilda is invisible to her father because she is a girl; in a flashback to her birth, he asks the doctor "I don't suppose we could exchange it for a boy?" But Mr Wormwood reluctantly keeps his girl. Miss Honey considers her a miracle, "quiet and gentle … not a bit stuck up" (Dahl: 1988: 84), rather like Perrault's Cinderella who was a "girl of wonderful goodness and gentleness" (Perrault: 1972), but there is much more to Matilda than her initial quiet presentation. While Cinderella is a helpless "abused young woman, orphaned by her mother and abandoned by her father" (Zipes: 2011:172) who because she has little to no agency, or ability to help herself better her situation, "endured it all" (Perrault: 1972), Matilda "resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid" and so "She made a decision. She decided that every time that her father or her mother was beastly to her she would get her own back in some way" (Dahl: 1988: 23). Immediately Matilda rejects the acceptable feminine passivity modelled in Cinderella by resolving to take action.

Though varied, what Cinderella stories "have in common is the conflict between a young girl and her step-mother and her siblings about her legacy. Cinderella must prove she is the rightful successor in a house in which she has been deprived her rights" (Zipes: 2011: 172). Cinderella needs the prince to re-elevate her to her rightful social status through marriage. Admittedly, Matilda's family situation is different to Cinderella's, yet Matilda, like Cinderella, is oppressed by gender and denied her rightful place in her family. It is possible, also, to read Matilda not as the 'natural' child of the Wormwoods at all, therefore, she is denied not just her place, but potentially, denied her rightful family as she appears to have been "born into the wrong family…like the noble children stolen by trolls in

Scandinavian lore" (Beauvais: 2015: 277). The neglect of her biological mother, and the scolding Matilda receives for reading, could be interpreted as abuse from the fairy tale figure of bad step mother, with figures like the librarian, Mrs Phelps, read as the caring and educated mother Matilda should have had. Her father, in the stage production never names her, but calls her "boy" and "young man" , focusing on his son who will succeed him in business.

Matilda's mother - Mrs Wormwood – lives a life that upholds the marriage plot. She reveals to Miss Honey that she is not "in favour" of educated girls, as education does not lead to marriage, marriage of course being the only acceptable outcome for her girl child. Instead, she advocates that "A girl should think about making herself attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books" (Dahl: 91). She backs up her point with reference to a romance she is watching on TV, saying:

"A girl doesn't get a man by being brainy…look at that film star for instance…you don't think she got him to do that by multiplying figures at him, do you. Not likely. And now he's going to marry her… and she's going to live in a mansion with a butler and lots of maids". (Dahl: 93)

Matilda rejects her mother's position, and in the closing chapters of the book, part of Matilda's reward, the resolution of her story, is being placed in the top form at school. Miss Honey, though educated and employed, and though she loves and appreciates Matilda, "is a problematic role model insofar as her mild nature compromises her relationship to other adults, who use her passivity and vulnerability against her"(Guest:2008:247). Miss Honey, who is trapped in her own Cinderella narrative, tries to act as Matilda's fairy godmother, but fails. Instead, she provides an opportunity for Matilda to change not only her own life, but the lives of others, thereby further rejecting gendered behaviour by becoming the prince, the rescuer of another. Matilda takes charge, and changes the narrative. In *Matilda the Musical,* before taking revenge on her father, who has ripped her library book to pieces, Kelly and Minchin's Matilda sings *Naughty,* a self-aware, metafictive song in which Matilda rejects the gender appropriate behaviour of passivity and obedience normally expected in a situation such as hers. She begins her song by questioning the inevitability of expected narrative outcomes:

Jack and Jill went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water, so they say

The subsequent fall was inevitable,

They never stood a chance – they were written that way

Innocent victims of their story

By the conclusion of this song, Matilda resolves not to be an innocent victim of her story, as “if you always take it on the chin and wear it nothing will change”, and “if it's not right, you have to put it right”, justifying her otherwise naughty behaviour.

Matilda challenges expectation by changing her story. She cultivates a defiant, resilient character and courageously pursues her love of reading and education to ensure her narrative will not conform to expectations of happiness-via-marriage. She will not need the help of a fairy godmother or a prince, rather she will use her brain and a touch of naughtiness (and magical abilities) to help herself and others, thereby rejecting the necessity of a prince, the marriage plot and the examples of acceptable adult femininity modelled to her by her mother, and by her teacher, Miss Honey.

It is significant that even Miss Honey’s story is devoid of romance. Yes, her passivity and goodness are rewarded with a comfortable and secure home, but it is important to remember her reward, her happiness, came by the courage and rebellion of a child, a girl child, and not via marriage. *Matilda the Musical* redeems Miss Honey’s weak character a little more than the book by making her the new principal after Miss Trunchbull’s departure (in the book she is replaced by a male teacher), and by finally giving her the courage to take action by making it her idea, not Matilda’s, for Matilda to live with her rather than be removed to Spain when her family flees the country. This final scene, in which Matilda leaves, or is rescued, from her own family, replaces the marriage scene that would usually conclude a Cinderella narrative. On stage, Matilda’s mother has practically left the set, but her father pauses and asks “what about the girl? Do you want to stay? Here, with Miss Honey?” to which Matilda replies, “Yes! Yes I do!” Mr Wormwood then turns to Miss Honey, and asks “And you want to look after her?”, and she simply states “I do.” Mr Wormwood literally gives his daughter away, releasing her from familial bonds while still a child, removing the need or opportunity for such a release via marriage at a later date. Miss Honey and Matilda have achieved happily ever after, because, as stated by Miss Honey in *Matilda the Musical*, “they had found each other”. Though it still concludes with an image of happily-ever-after, Matilda’s fairy tale rejects the standard Cinderella, happiness-via-marriage narrative journey, and presents instead a complex picture of ever-after which actually begins in childhood and suggests girls can be clever, educated, active, and even a bit naughty in order to change their stories and take control of their own lives.

Conclusion

When we read Matilda as a fairy tale which transforms the Cinderella story and the happiness-via-marriage script, by rejecting marriage as the only path to happily ever after, we see that it is possible to reject gendered scripts on how to be, and in particular on how to be happy. Matilda’s revolt against gendered stereotypes reminds us happiness for girls should not be dependent on men or marriage or, for that matter, any form of intimate relationship. Matilda offers hope that just as revolt against gendered narrative outcomes are possible for girl protagonists, revolt against normativity and limited expectations are a possibility for girls (and boys) living in real world too. Arthur Frank writes that “A good life requires telling any story from as many alternative perspectives as possible and recognizing how *all* the characters are trying to hold their own” (2010, p146). Celebrating the stories of those around us, rejoicing in their happiness and respecting their sadness, is crucial to living a fulfilling life. Some people we know will marry, others won’t. Some of us will find our romantic and intimate relationships to be deeply fulfilling and we should celebrate that without requiring others to do the same. Some of us will find our happiness and fulfilment in a network of friendships, in education, in religious conviction, in charitable work, in employment, in art galleries, concert halls, sporting fields, in mountain climbing, or in enjoying many of these activities.

If we find ourselves imagining happiness is only on the other side of marriage (or only on the other side of childbirth, home ownership or the next promotion) then we need stories that paint a more robust picture of happiness. Instead of dreaming of one day declaring that they all lived happily ever-after, we can be filled with joy that those around us simply lived. If a promise of future happiness is a technique to shape our behaviour, we can choose to not be controlled by a far-off future but embrace and celebrate moments of happiness in our everyday lives. Each day step into the shoes that do fit you, and go where they take you, and when you find yourself happy be thankful, and when you find yourself unhappy know that is part of life too, and do what you need to do. But find the people who help you to change the story, and who remind you that you do not need to squeeze your life into glass slippers that don’t fit.

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