

"An engrossing and compelling story of what would happen if the women from *The Nanny Diaries* met the women from *Sex and the City* in the social media age."

—JILL SANTOPOLO, author of *The Light We Lost*

HAPPY



&



YOU



KNOW



IT



LAURA HANKIN



# DEAR READER,

It turns out that rich New York City parents will pay hundreds of dollars for someone to sing “The Wheels on the Bus” to their babies. So when I first took a job teaching music to playgroups, I thought it would simply be a good way to make money. I had no idea it would change my life.

A general playgroup gig looked like this: I’d lug my guitar and egg shakers down five flights of stairs from my tiny walk-up apartment, take multiple subway trains, and usually end up running late, sprinting down the streets of the Upper East Side. I’d arrive at these penthouse apartments that looked like art galleries, greeted by impeccable women who toted their babies around like designer handbags. Sometimes these women were very kind. Sometimes, they’d get bored of me after my first song and proceed to talk loudly through the remaining forty minutes of my lesson, making me feel like a speck of dirt on their expensive shoes.

I was always thinking, “These women! Do they realize that I’m a real person with ideas and dreams?” I didn’t spend very much time thinking that these women were also real people with ideas and dreams until the day I was hired to sing for a playgroup meant to connect lonely new moms with one another. I showed up, and the first mom and her baby showed up, and we waited for all of her potential new mom friends to arrive.

And we waited. And we waited.

Finally, we had to face the fact that no one else was coming. It was uncomfortable. We didn’t know if it made any sense for me to do the lesson I’d planned. So we just started talking. (Well, the mom and I talked. The baby didn’t say much—typical baby!) Soon I realized: this woman was wonderful. She’d named her baby Cordelia because she loved King Lear! She was an expert in constitutional law! She was cool and funny, and I wanted to be friends with her, but when our 45 minutes were up, we parted ways and never saw each other again, because we lived in completely different worlds.

But our experience made me think about the ways in which I’d misjudged the other women in my playgroups. They were full and flawed humans who were grappling with their own struggles, celebrating their own joys, hoping that they could be the people and parents they wanted to be. Women who had complicated, beautiful stories inside of them, stories that I couldn’t even begin to imagine. But I tried anyway.

All that imagining turned into *Happy & You Know It*. I’m grateful to you for taking the time to read it, for letting my characters into your life even just for a little while. (Sometimes they make questionable decisions, but they’re trying their best!) I so hope that you enjoy the story, and that it gives you much to discuss with your book club. I’m a devoted book clubber myself, so please do reach out if you have questions, or even if you want to invite me to discuss with your group in person. If no one else shows up besides you and me, hey, we’ll make it work!

Warmly,

**LAURA**



# A conversation with **LAURA HANKIN**

## **Tell us about *Happy & You Know It*.**

*Happy & You Know It* is a novel about a failed musician who takes a job singing to a playgroup of rich mothers and their babies, only to get drawn into their lives and their secrets!

## **There are some cringe-worthy, laugh-out-loud moments in the novel as Claire gets to know the wealthy mothers and sings to their babies. Any moments from your own experiences singing to babies that stand out?**

I once sang at a birthday party for a one-year-old that probably cost more than most weddings I've been to (and yes, they were serving up a specialty cocktail named after the baby). And I've performed both for billionaires and celebrities, including a *Real Housewife* who was actually super-nice and engaged. Another time, the woman in a super-famous celebrity couple stood very distractingly in the back of my class to see if she liked it enough for her kid. She never came back, so I assume she didn't. I have some other stories, but those might be more in-person, off-the-record anecdotes. . . . But honestly, some days





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it was the best job in the world. I got to sing and cuddle adorable kids, and some of the moms were incredibly kind and interesting, and we're Facebook friends to this day, and I hope they read this book and know that none of the negative stuff is inspired by them!

**Although you're not a mother yourself, the way your characters feel about motherhood and the pressures they face feels so true-to-life. How were you able to channel those feelings and fears?**

At the time I started writing, I was already pretty steeped in motherhood culture due to my job in children's music, plus another part-time job that coincidentally involved writing for a website catering to millennial moms. But beyond that, I did my research: I asked my friends who were mothers all sorts of questions and, luckily, they weren't afraid to be honest with me. I got a bunch of baby books out of the library and studied them on the subway, learning all about the nitty-gritty aspects of raising a human (like meconium??). I thought a lot about my own mother, and my hope that one day I'll become a mother myself. And I tried to imagine the reality of that. If I had a baby, what would I miss about my current life? What would I be so thankful for? What sorts of anxieties that I have now would motherhood exacerbate? But I'm glad to hear it feels true-to-life because speaking of anxiety, I was definitely nervous at various points in the writing process that a mob of mothers would come yell at me for presuming to know anything about their lives.



**Your novel explores the pressure to appear as if we have it all together. What do you think about the ongoing pressure to be “Instagram perfect?”**

I think it makes the vast majority of us miserable, and we might all be happier if we threw our phones into the sea.

**The women Claire works for use specialty vitamins and outrageously expensive beauty products that promise the impossible. Why do you think we’re drawn to these wellness and beauty cure-alls?**

I mean, who doesn’t want tons of energy and dewy skin? But also, I think women are taught from childhood that the way we look is one of the most valuable currencies we possess. We see real-world examples of women “losing value” as they age all the time—the actresses who stop getting work, the women whose husbands trade them in for newer models, etc. . . . It’s a dangerous and pervasive idea that makes many of us want to push off aging as long as possible, no matter how much the necessary skin care might cost. And when it comes to wellness cure-alls, there’s an added layer. A lot of research shows that doctors are more likely to ignore or downplay women’s pain than men’s pain. If the traditional medical path hasn’t worked for women, it makes sense that they might be tempted to turn to alternative remedies.

**Which of the characters in your novel do you relate to the most? The least?**

Claire was definitely my way in, but I related

to almost all of the characters. I’ve struggled in a very Whitney-esque way with wanting to be perfect and universally well-liked. Amara’s voice actually came easiest to me, though. I set myself the goal of being as witty and biting as possible, and then walked around mumbling to myself in a British accent, saying all the things I’m too people-pleasing and Whitney-like to normally say out loud. In terms

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of which of the characters I related to least, it’s probably all the babies. Sorry, but learn to have a conversation already!

**What challenges did you face while writing the book?**

Well, I didn’t have a guaranteed book deal while I was writing it, so I definitely grappled with the fear that it might never see the light of day. But beyond that, I had a lot of

trouble starting out. At first, the story was too satirical, presenting the so-called “perfect” mothers from a very surface-level (and not very empathetic) place. When I was able to lock into their backstories, figuring out what they were afraid of and what made them human, that’s when the story really started flowing. Also I wrote the first fifty pages with an entirely different main character until my wonderful agent Stefanie Lieberman took a look and told me, in the kindest possible way, “Love the concept, love so many of the things here, but do you think that your main character is boring and should not be in the book?”

### What do you hope readers take away from reading *Happy & You Know It*?

I hope ultimately that readers come away with empathy for all of the characters, even those who make some questionable or ruthless decisions. I hope, too, that people leave with the idea that perfection is impossible, so screw it! (I write, as I sit here in my yoga pants about to force myself to the gym. . . .)

### You’ve written for theater and comedy sketches. How does fiction writing differ?

I love writing sketches, where you get to pick one big idea or joke and then just blow it out in all sorts of fun ways. But fiction gives you the room and the freedom to explore lots of ideas, to go off on tangents and dive into backstories and character development and, of course, sex scenes.

### Spill it! What is the one song that always kills with the diaper set?

I don’t know if I will ever again witness pure joy like I did back in the heyday of *Frozen* whenever I started singing “Let it Go.” In terms of timeless classics, though, it feels a little like cheating to say it because of the book’s title, but it’s true: kids were always very excited for “If You’re Happy and You Know It.”



## About Laura Hankin

**LAURA HANKIN** has written for McSweeney’s and HuffPost, among other publications. The viral videos that she creates and stars in with her comedy duo, Feminarchy, have been featured in *Now This*, *The New York Times*, and *Funny or Die*. She grew up in Washington, D.C., attended Princeton University, and now lives in New York City, where she has performed off-Broadway, acted on-screen, and sung to far too many babies.

**LAURAHANKIN.COM**

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. What character did you relate to the most, and why?
2. Who do you think is the true villain in this story?
3. Why do you think Claire was drawn so deeply into the world of the playgroup women? Would she have gotten as invested in a different playgroup, or was this one unique?
4. As you were reading, how did you expect the events hinted at in the prologue to play out? Who did you think would become the woman running down the street, and why?
5. What do you think of the book's view on motherhood as yet another way for women to be judged?
6. What are your thoughts on Momstagram accounts like the one that Whitney has?
7. What do you think the story was trying to say about the wellness industry? Do you agree or disagree?
8. How did your opinions of the characters—particularly Claire, Amara, Whitney, Christopher, and Gwen—change throughout the story?
9. What did you think about the book's portrayal of female friendship? Which of the characters would you most want to be friends with?
10. What do you imagine might happen to the characters after the ending of the story as they deal with their new infamy? Do you think they will all stay in one another's lives?
11. How did the flashbacks to Whitney's and Gwen's childhoods inform your views of how they were acting in the present?

