

## **A Conversation with Rafael Yglesias**

### **Author of *A Happy Marriage* (Scribner)**

**Q: *A Happy Marriage* is a stunning novel, and obviously a very personal story. What sets it apart is the level of emotional honesty and candor exhibited from Enrique mostly, but also from Margaret and her parents. How hard was it to share this story in the form of a novel?**

A: I stopped writing the novel three times because it was too painful. There was at least one gap of six months during which I felt sure that I would never return to it. My desire to make the story vividly immediate, to bring the reader into the skin of a young man in love and a middle-aged man losing the love of his life, meant I had to relive those feelings day by day with exquisite slowness. Then I had to go over them again and again because the emotional nature of the work made it harder than usual to write clearly. While composing the beginning chapters the process seemed unbearable, impossible to sustain for hundreds of pages. In addition, my desire to write as honestly as I could about marriage entailed a level of expose that felt too raw. Since I believed such rawness was needed to make the book useful, I repeatedly felt that I shouldn't continue to write it all. I tried to write other things. Although I wrote as much as one hundred pages of another novel, I couldn't sustain interest in any other story. Finally I decided to write the novel and not publish it. That didn't seem so great a sacrifice since none of my novels have sold particularly well. After that decision, I had another wrenching, slow two weeks of struggle, sitting at my desk for as long as six hours a day without producing more than a paragraph or two. By the third week the work became, not less painful, but a way to complete my grieving. The natural process of grieving is recovering the person you were with the loved one who has died. I was having trouble recovering that self. Staying with the work, forcing myself to reproduce who I was with my late wife as honestly as I could, became my way of fishing my lost self back. Although writing the remainder of the novel remained emotionally draining, it also became a sort of rebirth. By the end I felt I was saying goodbye in a deeper way than I ever had before. That made it hurt more, but the pain's depth seems to have left me at peace.

**Q: In alternating time frames in successive chapters you offer a unique perspective on Enrique's and Margaret's relationship. Was this how you originally conceived the story, or was it a narrative strategy that grew out of the telling?**

A: I had the alternating time structure before I began. However, my original plan of how to alternate was somewhat different. I planned to write the novel in two parts. Part One was going to alternate between the first three weeks of the courtship and the last three weeks of Margaret's life. Then I planned to write Part Two, which would have consisted of alternating the year of Enrique's affair, with chapters about the year he realizes he has fallen back in love with Margaret. Halfway through writing the novel I realized that once Enrique and Margaret consummate and she says goodbye to him, the story would be over for the reader. I considered briefly dropping any portrait at all of the middle of the marriage. I dismissed that solution because it seemed to me that then the novel wouldn't be a portrait of a long marriage. I decided to compress my original plan for Part Two into four chapters and insert those chapters contrapuntally. I quickly felt that was superior, an even better use of contrasting time periods of the marriage.

**Q: Your depiction of Greenwich Village in the 1970's seems like a place of optimism, creativity, and opportunity. From a literary standpoint, it seems to be the ideal place to fashion a blossoming love affair. Can you describe what the neighborhood meant to you as a young man and what it means to you today?**

A: In my youth the Village represented bohemian New York, a haven for individualists, artists, outcasts, the home for true democracy and tolerance, the real American dream. It retains that history today, and it remains the most pleasant part of New York to live in, but it has become utterly respectable, more a hip place for the rich than a home for creativity and rebellion.

**Q: The level of detail you go to in describing Margaret's illness is exacting and unsparing. Will you talk a little bit about your thought process as you included the tiniest details of her treatment and daily life as a cancer patient?**

A: Too many people have direct experience of cancer – it will strike one in three – to write about the disease discretely and hope to make reading

about it worthwhile at all. If I softened or obscured the details of the typical deterioration of cancer, then my novel would become discouraging to readers who had lost people to the disease. They would feel more alone while reading my novel rather than less so, the opposite of what I hoped to achieve. More than anything I feel what fiction does best is relieve us of the solitude of our experience. That said, I actually left out a great number of her illness's details because I felt they would have been repetitious and punishing, rather than involving or cathartic. As unsparing as my novel may seem to some readers, from my point of view I was appropriately restrained.

**Q: Enrique's transformation from a brash young man to a mature and compassionate husband and father is one of the most satisfying elements of the story. Your narrative technique, though, makes us see young Enrique and older Enrique side by side rather than on a continuum. Did the juxtaposition reveal anything to you about his character that you might not have realized otherwise?**

A: I understood Enrique as developing along a continuum before I wrote the book. I conceived of the alternating structure because I believe that what works between two people always works, and what doesn't is always difficult. What happens over time is that one or both parties learn to compromise or understand or compensate for the mismatches. That unity, that timelessness at the heart of any long marriage, is best revealed through the contrapuntal shifts.

**Q: At the end of the novel Enrique is clearly devastated, "The Margaret he needed to speak to was gone." You choose not to end it there, though, instead returning to him as a young man and the long-awaited consummation of his and Margaret's relationship. The pairing of these two incidents is painful and beautiful. Why did you decide to finish this sad story on an ecstatic note?**

A: That ecstasy is what Enrique is losing. Hello-Goodbye, loss-having, hate-love, harmony-dissonance: they are what make two individuals into a whole. What makes losing someone so painful is the ecstasy you had with them.

**Q: Finally, the last line of the book, "he exhaled the despair of his soul and he thought with glee: I'm home! I'm home! Thank God, I'm home!," immediately reminded me of Molly's last line in Ulysses,**

**spoken in a similar pose. Do I read too much into it, or is this a conscious echoing of Joyce? Likewise, do the words "I'm home" also relate to the older Enrique we last see at Margaret's side at novel's end, at home finally after the long journey of Margaret's illness?**

A: I'm embarrassed to admit that I've never read Joyce's *Ulysses*. Since everyone else in my family has read it – and two have taken courses on it – I've heard of Molly's ecstasy many times, so I can't claim it's impossible that I was influenced, but I doubt it. Throughout the passages depicting young Enrique he feels adrift and alone, in some ways orphaned. He feels it as well when older. That feeling is expressed particularly in the chapter about his father's death. That's what a long-term relationship is: the making of a new family, a new home for the head and heart. And no, there's no intention to present Margaret's death as any kind of arrival for him or her. Her death is the loss of his home. That's why I go to its beginning at the end, to bring the full meaning of the loss, as it were, home for the reader. If it that seems too sad an ending, all I can suggest is that at least Enrique lived in the sturdy house of their love for a long time.