



Uncomfortably Happily

Yeon-Sik Hong

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Inspired by Yeon-sik Hong's attempt to move to the country with his partner, *Uncomfortably, Happily* is the story of a young couple finding their way. Burdened by unmet comics deadlines and high rent, our narrator and his wife know they must make a change. Convinced the absence of traffic noise will ease his writer's block, our pair welcomes the idea of building a life from scratch. Deciding on a home atop an uninhabited mountain, they excitedly embrace the charms of their new rural existence.

From tending to the land and attempting grocery runs through snow, to the complexities of fighting depression in seclusion, the move does not immediately prove to be the golden ticket they'd hoped for, and the silence of the mountain poses as much of an obstacle to output as the sirens of the city. Through it all, though, we see simple pleasures seep in and gain prominence over these commercial, and, often, comparatively trivial worries: the smell of the forest, the calming weight of enveloping snow, and the gratification of a stripped down life making art begin to muffle other concerns.

Originally published in Korean to great acclaim and winning the Manhwa Today award, *Uncomfortably, Happily* uniquely explores our narrator's inner world. Hong propels the comic with gorgeously detailed yet simple art, sharing the story of two lives unfolding slowly, sometimes uncomfortably, yet ultimately, happily.

Uncomfortably Happily Details

Date : Published June 13th 2017 by Drawn and Quarterly (first published 2012)

ISBN : 9781770462601

Author : Yeon-Sik Hong

Format : Paperback 576 pages

Genre : Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, Comics, Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction

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Elyse Walters says

Let's be honest.....

I felt overwhelmed before I even started this 600 page graphic autobiography.

Its physically heavy. It wasn't cheap either. Doesn't sound like I'm selling this book very well -does it?....

.....On the politically correct plus side of things,.....the book cover is recycled paper: nobody had to tell me that -- it's pretty obvious!

I've mentioned this before -- I've developed an appreciation for graphic novels (I WANT THE CREAM OF THE CROP ONE'S),no crappy junkie graphics, please.

I can justify buying these from time to time, because I can put them in our guest room to be read by our visitors.

This book had some BUZZ PRESS..... great professional reviews-

"Yippy.....I'm all over it"!

"I'm all over it?", really?" When did I start talking like this?

Forgive me -- I'm stuck at home unable to walk much for a few days. (a little boo-boo-zapped out of my heel)...

Once I stopped resisting reading this lengthy book....the story took hold quickly.

We follow a married couple who leave the city for the mountains.

We get an honest look at their real life - the struggles and happiness. They are both artists. They thought they wanted a less hectic life --The husband is the one with the type of personality that tends to spin out of control with worry and anxiety. His wife is the cooler - calmer - and collective one.

However, living in the mountains was not easy for either of them. They had all the seasons to survive.

One of their struggles was money - The husband was especially finding it difficult to move his career forward.

Happy moments were things like grilled fish jerky and seaweed and mackerel.... AND THE SWEET SMILES FROM THE WIFE: her calmness - for both of them was uplifting.

They each had inner -independent -frustrations --but it was moving to read about how this couple problem solved together.

Possibly 200 pages longer than this book needed to be---yet it was heartfelt-- touching, and charming. Dogs, cats, gardening, writing, cooking, dealing with the elements---brrrrrr.....the couple was nested with love.

3.7 stars.

Melki says

What a strange read . . .

A young, newly married Korean couple flee the city for life in an isolated rented house on a mountain. He's working on a graphic novel; she's working on her art. Neither is very likable. They whine, and they carp. He

fumes about deadlines, and his editor, then tussles with his inner demons, rages at tourists visiting the mountain, and criticizes his wife's cooking. She repeatedly mentions that she should get a job, and contribute to their income, but does nothing about it.

The artwork is not spectacular:

... although I do like the way the author draws cats licking themselves.

So, I should have hated this book, right?

And yet . . .

I had trouble putting it down; I kept turning and turning the pages - all 572 of them!

There is a certain sweetness and charm to this couple, and their efforts at homemaking, their willingness to put in the hours and back-breaking work to achieve their dreams. And, I LOVE the way they celebrate and enjoy each season; they really take the time to appreciate nature.

The ending was rather bittersweet, but oh, so realistic.

Wherever they are now, here's hoping this couple is still happily together.

David Schaafsma says

A beautifully done graphic memoir by Korean artist Yeon-Sik Hong about he and his wife's year or so renting an isolated house on a mountain. At 592 pages (originally published in two volumes) it is massive, promising Moby Dick-like epic-ness, but what you get is the sweet story of the marriage of two artists.

Hong needs to get out of Seoul, a big, loud, dirty city, though he is still going to school there. He wants clean air and isolation. He also needs to find a balance between the commercial art projects that pay his bills and the graphic novels he wants to write. Typical artist struggle, the artistic dream and the financial reality. He is anguished, driven to illness, overworking, driving himself crazy, also procrastinating all the time. Annoying, but honest. His wife is happy and stable, talks him out--as much as possible--of his craziness, and does her own art, which she becomes wildly successful with! As does Hong, finally, as he learns to calm down, and actually completes this tome in part about that process of achieving emotional stability.

But the real sweetness of the book is the portrait of a marriage--barely surviving, almost freezing to death in the mountain winter, with cats and a dog, and too much work. This is a kind of romantic story, finally, credit going to his wife for hanging in there with him and her own success. Never read a Korean story? Here you go, you won't regret it.

Dov Zeller says

This is a very long book that repeats a lot of daily happenings and goes deep into the author's anxieties. It goes on and on to the point where I feel fairly acutely the frustration and struggles I think that the author is trying to make clear. But also, I kind of feel frustrated with him and the book at a certain point and by the end I was much more interested in reading his partner's work, which I can't seem to find. It is not, as far as I can tell, available in English.

There is a lot to appreciate about this book, but also, I found it difficult to stay engaged and had very mixed feelings about the project as a whole. Here is a super positive review, that I think does a good job getting at what is great about this book. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/art...>

Here is my somewhat less sparkling review.

A young newly married heterosexual couple, Hong I think significantly older than his wife? (I was a little confused about that part. Did they meet while he was her teacher? Or just a more experienced artist? Were they around the same age or is she a fair amount younger?) move from a bustling, loud neighborhood in Seoul to a house in the sticks. They do it for a change of pace, and partly because Hong is really struggling with writer's block or, perhaps more accurately, with working at a job he doesn't like, where he is doing art without creative freedom and his supervisor is constantly asking him to do a lot of revisions. The city is getting to him. Or maybe it's the job is getting to him. Or both. How much of moving out of the city is his idea and how much his wife's? I'm not sure. But she does see how intensely he's struggling. It's possible she thinks some distance from the city will do him good?

So, basically, they start looking at places outside the city and don't really find what they are looking for until they get to this house on the side of a mountain, with no vehicle of their own, no good public transportation. It's a twenty-five minute walk to the nearest bus stop (with a steep hill to factor in) and the buses that come there don't exactly come on schedule (and there aren't a lot of them). But, they still choose to live in this house and suddenly they go from the chaos of the city to pretty intense isolation. And it doesn't fix Hong's struggles. If anything, his anxiety is exacerbated as is, it seems, their poverty (two young artists living together, not making very much money, trying to scrape by. Really wanting to do work that is fulfilling to them.)

The isolation perhaps exacerbates his anxiety or is one of the pressures that brings his crisis to the boiling point after which, he moves to the other side of it. Gradually. During this time, he becomes engaged in gardening and does a lot of work taking care of the house. They get through a frightening hard winter, monsoon season. They deal with trespassers/hikers who litter and don't seem to have much respect for the area or Hong and his wife's property. (They don't own it, but still, they feel protective of their home and also the surrounding wilderness areas.)

As the book goes on, Hong gains some perspective. He sees himself as his wife's mentor and caretaker to a certain extent at the beginning of the book. And perhaps at the beginning of their relationship his wife sees him as her mentor as well. But as time goes on, she becomes more independent as an artist and comes into her own voice and aesthetic. And as that is happening, he finds he is faced with some truths about himself as an artist and thinker.

There is a lot of joy and anguish in this book. And a lot of dailiness. There is the dog, the cats, the chickens the cucumbers, the mugwort, the swimming hole, the chestnut tree, the phone calls, the getting from one

place to another, the working on manuscripts and the pinky swears. A lot to enjoy, but in the end, it just was a bit too openly structured without offering the satisfaction of a deep reflective voice. Hong is open in terms of showing very personal parts of their life and dynamic. But without the kind of analytic inner voice and structure that moves the book's voicing from the "what" into the "so what" terrain (thinking of Vivian Gornick) territory as deeply as I would have liked.

Maybe over the next few days as the book continues to sink and settle in I'll find my feelings about it will change. But for now, I'll leave it at that.

Jason says

Incredible graphic memoir. In this book's afterword, Hellen Jo (who translated it from Korean) says that when she read it for the first time, she kept grabbing her boyfriend and yelling "IS THIS US?!" I too found this book eerily relatable to me and my wife's struggles: dealing with rising rents and greedy landlords, moving out of the city and feeling both lonely/out of the loop and inspired by our peaceful new surroundings. This book will send you into a dark head space at times, especially during the long and harrowing "winter" chapters, where deadlines, poverty, and fever dreams push the author to the brink of a nervous breakdown. But keep powering through with this couple's story, there's a lot of hard-won wisdom and inspiration to be found.

Aaron says

Mr. Hong is a serious layabout. He's good at his craft, sure. And his idealism is admirable, yes. But the Yeon-sik Hong of **UNCOMFORTABLY HAPPILY** is perhaps the most regrettably honest a creative person can possibly be. If not for the steely kindness and self-sustaining compassion of his wife, Sohmi Lee, then it seems inevitable that Mr. Hong would have ended up in a ditch somewhere (no doubt surrounded by used ink pens, crumpled drafting boards, and fossilized dog poop).

UNCOMFORTABLY HAPPILY is a fairly easy read. Easy, because autobiographical graphic novels have a tendency to assuage the heft of their narratives by way of humor, charisma, and an amicable otherness. Fairly, because in this particular publication, the subject (Yeon-sik) is not a particularly likeable fellow. And while the book itself tracks Yeon-sik and Sohmi's residence at a mountainside home for a calendar year -- navigating the frustrations of a life full of privacy but devoid of private success; it could just as well be said that Yeon-sik tests the patience of the reader in much the same way the unyielding Pocheon mountains test the mettle of the young couple.

The initial impulse to move away from the posh, congested life of southern Seoul and into the rural, mountainous north, in Pocheon, isn't so much debated by Yeon-sik and Sohmi as much as it is agreed upon by default. The two freelance illustrators need to get away from the city; they need space; they need fresh air; they need an environment that allows them to create.

Yeon-sik, after all, is lazy (rebutting established deadlines), unmotivated ("I just don't have the confidence to push my way out."), and on frequent occasion, emotionally unstable. The natural environs should do him some good, right? It sounds ideal, and for a while, it is. The scenery is beautiful; clear streams, clear skies, wildlife, wild berries, and nuts. Should he go for a walk? He can go anywhere! He practically owns the

whole mountain!

And yet, that's just it. *It's a whole freakin' mountain*; it's the greatest beast of the natural order. The mountain is uncaring, unimpeded, and wholly insensitive to the pains, desires, and dispositions of humankind. To believe the mountain exists in service of human needs, Yeon-sik finds, is the gravest tactical error one can make.

Add to this the punishing winters of northern ROK? Add to this the burden of knowing Sohmi has made tremendous progress on her children's book? In **UNCOMFORTABLY HAPPILY**, Yeon-sik's expectations of himself are drawn thin, and then promptly snapped in two.

The lessons Mr. Hong eventually learns about creativity, drive, and the support structures necessary for these human elements to endure, are not without missteps and cursing and discontented fever dreams. The author's apparent brush with illness, both physical and mental, does threaten to pull the narrative sideways (How many times can an autobiography double-back on itself?). Fortunately, the savior of both Mr. Hong, as well as the book, is standing there on the cover (and the spine, and the interior front flap, and the back cover): Ms. Lee.

Sohmi's quiet, dogged pursuit of health and balance reminds readers of the importance of emotional stability in the creative process (and of emotional maturity, while questing to survive in dire straits). Her sense of humor is invaluable, and her even temper is hard to miss. When Yeon-sik claims to be "in a state of total anger" or "rotting" or "ashamed" or an "incompetent fool," it is never Yeon-sik who pulls him back from the edge; it's Sohmi.

I.D. says

Maybe something was just lost in the translation for me, but I just wasn't that into this. The art was great, but the main character was a whiny jerk and his wife was very one dimensional. I could see how comic artists could find something here but I didn't really. It had a sweet ending that salvaged much for me but getting there was occasionally an exercise in wanting to throttle the lead.

Mateen Mahboubi says

A sprawling graphic novel of domestic life, leaving the city for the quiet rural life. Probably a bit longer than I would have liked. I did love the exploration of the relationship but it got a bit too dramatic at the end when the focus shifted from the relationship/career of our protagonists to the impacts of the changes in the properties around where they live. A lot to like here (I really connected with the gardening bits especially) but I just felt that there wasn't enough meat to sustain for as long as it was.

Stewart Tame says

This was really good! It's an autobiographical tale. To get away from the high rents and hubbub of Seoul, Hong and his wife moved to the country, to a small house high up on a rural mountain. Part of the story is about their coping with the massive lifestyle changes and distractions of country life. Hong also went

through an internal struggle to come to grips with his growing discontent with his chosen career of comics artist and the constant battle for financial stability.

The book is rich in observed detail and paints a vivid picture of rural life. Hong has a nice, clean style with just the right amount of detail. One technique he uses to good effect is to portray himself multiple times in a single panel as a way of showing himself wrestling with a problem--each self essentially argues one aspect of the situation. It's an interesting way to portray mental states. There are also a few fantasy and dream sequences that are quite striking. My favorite of these was himself and his wife breaking out into song after planting a garden and their pets join in to sing about the fertilizer they contributed. It's just goofy and fun. Loved this book! Highly recommended!

Margaret King says

A graphic novel saga of two struggling married artists who move to a remote rental home on a mountain after financial desperation and frustrations in big city Seoul. The narrator's wife takes to rural life with a cheerful attitude and thrives creatively, while he (a big city kid) becomes isolated and paranoid, nearly having both a complete physical and mental breakdown. Over the span of 500 pages or so, we witness a lot of their triumphs and trials, everything from the challenges of carrying groceries without a car from town up the mountain to rural buses that never arrive to trying to keep their home heated with coal bricks and a little stove.

I think many of us dream of moving to some idyllic location, and their mountain, covered in bamboo forest and filled with waterfalls and pools, sounds like a paradise, a kind of Eden with just the two of them. However, we get wake up calls when we consider their struggles, everything from invading tourists who leave litter all over their forest to a despicable and casual act of random cruelty towards their beloved dog from a local. I think the real treat of this book was experiencing the joys and sorrows of rural living as a reader along with this couple, as well as the joys and sorrows of being an artist and trying to make money from one's creative work. Great illustrations. Really related to the author, as this work was largely autobiographical, but loved his wife's can-do and happy spirit.

Mark Victor Young says

Really entertaining story of a couple. The author took the time and space required to investigate this semi-autobiographical (?) tale of a newly-married couple in unique circumstances in South Korea. It's a graphic novel about two graphic novelists - one of them writing what he knows! But the artwork and the honesty and the adversity are so compelling that the size of the book becomes its greatest strength, as you keep on wanting more of this story.

James says

A good reason why artists should have savings or an indulgent spouse. Also a sad comment on development and land greed in the country.

Erin says

At over 500 pages, this is a commitment. Some of the humor and sentiment does not translate well, but what does, sticks. It's cheery, and dark, and frustrating, and relatable, and adorable.

Rod Brown says

This book is a bit uneven - I could have done without all the fantasy and dream sequences for instance - but if you commit and make it through to the end, you get a pretty good portrait of a man navigating a psychological and physical crisis through the strength of a loving relationship with his wife. At first I was annoyed by the narrator's whininess and then at one point I worried the narrative was going to take a turn toward *The Shining*, but this semi-autobiographical book stays on a domestic drama track and has a subtle but rewarding ending.

Matt Ely says

This is very different from most graphic novels I've read. The author is merciless about himself, both reveling and ridiculing the escapist fantasy of moving off the grid. Anyone with a penchant for procrastination, financial stress, and thought spirals will find themselves clearly reflected. Perhaps what I enjoyed most, though, was the clear expression of the secret language of a marriage, an understanding that only two people are allowed to share. This was a wonderful journey, though not always a pleasant one, and I'd recommend it broadly. Though I think it works best when read a chapter at a time, not all at once.
