

# Starting from scratch with a smile

## Happiness creates laughter in novel

CHRISTY NICH

*Patricia Marx is making several appearances at this year's WordFest.*

Imogene Gilfeather is clearly an introvert who has no need for, nor appreciation of outside validation. When it's suggested she meet the perfect man for her, she responds that "perfect is not her type." In fact, the only passion she displays throughout the book *Starting from Happy* is to win a contract at Saks Fifth Avenue for her line of fine lingerie, Featherware, which includes special occasion models such as the Lacy Low Rise Easter Panties and the Passover Let My People Go bra.

Still, she manages to meet Mr. Perfect by accident (as much as one can have an accident in fiction) shortly after. Things are not off to a flying start.

Wally is a guileless, hopelessly romantic optimist who seems to get what he wants purely because he sees no other alternative than success. He's a serial monogamist who patiently infiltrates Imogene's life and her enviable apartment with its wraparound terrace — so rare in New York City. He guides her through all the milestones of conventional life that she is so obviously not interested in, dodging career mishaps, criminal charges and outside offers for procreation along the way.

That, in itself, is a compelling read, but the triple bonus prize of this

### BOOK REVIEW

#### STARTING FROM HAPPY

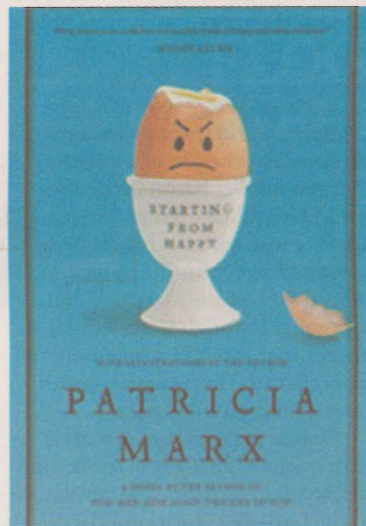
Patricia Marx  
Simon & Schuster, 234 pp.

book is author Patricia Marx's dry, sly, obtuse, inane, academic, slapstick and poignant writing style. Reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, this is a case where the joy is in the journey, not the destination — which, after all, in a story about life, always ends in death.

For example, Imogene does not want children and her reasons are described in many chaplettes including where she looks to the dysfunctional "forbears" in her family tree. Close observation shows that her grandparents are "adopted and foundling," thus making that genetic-based argument moot. Wally's pedigree, included in the name of fairness, includes all happy faces.


The "who's who" list at the beginning ends with Paul S. Rossin, with the description "God only knows." The book is also dedicated to him. He is also listed in the index with some clues as to why Marx put his name, and others she secretly wants to thank, in print. There are other secrets inside the book: why does Bounce's fingerprint contain the word "NINA"? Twice? Are all the words used really words? What's with the kumquats?

Marx has such a good time writing this book that she jumps right into the story at times to exert her will over the plot and characters or to express opposition. She is also listed among



characters and in the index. Chaplette 506 reads "To the readers who have felt themselves swept with consternation regarding the brevity of the chaplettes, Patty asks 'Have you checked out life lately?'" Marx addresses the use of these short bursts of plot in three ways: she says she's "temperamentally terse"; she says she's writing for the ADD reader and wants to save them from boredom; and she says she learned to keep the words to a minimum through her comedic writing years at *Saturday Night Live*.

Regardless of the rationale, the technique works well with her effortless free flow of imagination and laugh-out-loud humour. According to the book cover, even Woody Allen thinks so, and according to the back, lots of other important people agree.

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