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Book Review: I Smile Back

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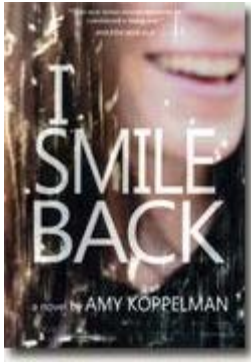


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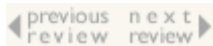


[I Smile Back](#)

Amy Koppelman
Two Dollar Radio
Paperback
194 pages
December 2008



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amazon.com



When Amy Koppelman published her first novel in 2003, critics heralded her work as a “smart, sensitive first novel” that would be “life-changing” for its readers. In *A Mouthful of Air*, Koppelman dealt honestly and brutally with the subject of postpartum depression, a disease—she reported in a 2003 interview—affecting 50 to 80 percent of new mothers. Koppelman’s premiere novel offered a departure from others in the mommy-lit. genre, a darker glimpse into the underworld of parenting and away from what one reader called the “now-hackneyed Mothers Struggling and Juggling Babies and Hedge Funds story line.”

Her second effort continues to limn the complexities of motherhood while challenging the stereotypical happily-ever-after story line of contemporary mommy lit novels. Koppelman’s [I Smile Back](#) follows the seemingly ideal but increasingly chaotic life of its protagonist, Laney, a suburban mom with nice house, hair, and SUV; an apparently doting (but of course flawed) husband; and two beautiful children whom she vows to love “forever and ever.” This, of course, is all veneer, all glossy surface, for Laney is hiding some pretty deep secrets: infidelity, drug use, the beginnings of a breakdown.



Koppelman presents her story as if a play in several acts, with a brief intermission. The “intermission” separates Laney’s suburban life in New Jersey, the two acts book-ending the protagonist’s stay at a mental hospital; this intermission, then, offers not a rest for the reader but for Laney, who tries to get well, freeing herself from substance abuse and from the haunting thrum of her own despair. Koppelman experiments in the novel’s intermission with several different forms, including short stories, poetry, stream-of-consciousness prose: hoping, I assume, to mirror the disordered state of Laney’s own mind.

But at times this disorder almost seems too much, as if Koppelman is stretching the boundaries of convention for effect, losing readers—or at least this reader—in the process of trying to rhetorically replicate Laney’s destructive behavior and mind. Certainly at times I empathized with Laney, understanding perfectly the searing pain she feels when recognizing her children’s mortality, and her own. Much more often, however, Koppelman’s protagonist feels completely foreign to me, making me wonder whether it was I—or Laney—who was the true anomaly among suburban mothers. Was Laney meant to be representative of the despair felt by many mothers? Or was her journey extraordinary? How many other mothers in PTA are snorting coke and driving to nearby cities for a one-night stand? And really, does anyone else use her daughter’s Winnie the Pooh plush doll to masturbate, “grinding her clit into Pooh’s face”?

If yes, then I live in a singular world indeed.

Actually, it is scenes like Laney’s Winnie the Pooh ride and the liberal use of the word *fuck* that finally ended my sympathies for the addled Laney and for Koppelman’s book. No prude am I, but there is a point at which “fuck” as a rhetorical device becomes in its own way cloying, a cliché of deviance, perhaps, suggesting Koppelman is trying too hard—or, perhaps, not hard enough—to create her character.

In [I Smile Back](#), Koppelman tries to press boundaries, bravely experimenting—and just as often failing—with fictional devices meant to convey Laney’s plummet into despair, depression, madness. Whether there is remedy to her hopelessness remains, at best, ambiguous. But by the novel’s end, I didn’t really care, for I found Laney—and her husband, her lovers, her kids—to be insufferable and self-absorbed. I was ready to be done with the whole lot, so that even with a book just under 200 pages, the novel’s end couldn’t come quickly enough.