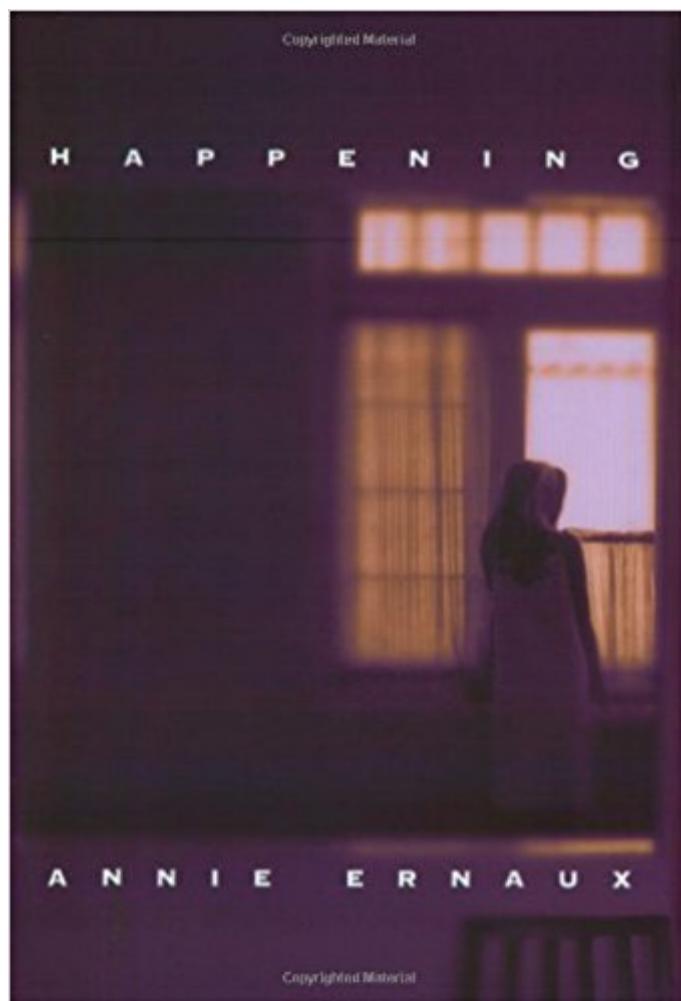


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# Happening



## Synopsis

In 1963, Annie Ernaux, 23 and unattached, realizes she is pregnant. Shame arises in her like a plague: Understanding that her pregnancy will mark her and her family as social failures, she knows she cannot keep that child. This is the story, written forty years later, of a trauma Ernaux never overcame. In a France where abortion was illegal, she attempted, in vain, to self-administer the abortion with a knitting needle. Fearful and desperate, she finally located an abortionist, and ends up in a hospital emergency ward where she nearly dies. In *Happening*, Ernaux sifts through her memories and her journal entries dating from those days. Clearly, cleanly, she gleans the meanings of her experience.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

French novelist and memoirist Ernaux (*Shame*; *A Frozen Woman*; etc.) was 23 in 1963 when she discovered she needed an abortion. After an unsuccessful attempt with a knitting needle, she tracked down a backstreet abortionist in Paris. Her three-month-old embryo was finally expelled some days later in the bathroom of her student dorm, the bloody remains flushed down the toilet. Ernaux tells the story of those awful months very simply, with only occasional asides of hindsight. A few well-chosen details "If I Had a Hammer" on the jukebox, the Singing Nun's "Dominique," the sexually predatory Movement men anchor her story in the early '60s, although most of the emotional texture (the body denial, panic, that feeling that "my ass had caught up with me") is disturbingly timeless. Ernaux's preoccupation with "power" over her "text" makes her postmodernism plain,

although there's also a wonderfully old-fashioned Frenchness in her world view. Stretched out on the abortionist's table, she sees the scene before her like a still life: Formica table with enamel basis, probe, hairbrush. Ernaux needed to write this history: the making of a written record is the only reason she can find for this otherwise accidental pregnancy and its bloody aftermath. Indeed, readers who lived through the Bad Old Days before abortion was legalized will meet a lot of old demons here, even if a younger generation may find it bafflingly understated. Though not destined for a wide readership, it is an important, resonant work. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Though not well known in this country, Ernaux is celebrated and widely taught in her native France. In the United States, two of her works *A Woman's Story* and *A Man's Place* were both chosen as New York Times Notable Books, and *Shame* made Publishers Weekly's best books list for 1998. Ernaux's writing, here beautifully translated by Leslie, and her books themselves are slim, clean, and unadorned, yet they manage to capture felt experience with immediacy and impact. This new volume recalls a time in 1963 when Ernaux, 23 and single, learned that she was pregnant and set out to obtain an abortion, illegal in France at the time. She tried a knitting needle on herself, finally found an abortionist, then nearly died in an emergency room. This material is rife with opportunities for the writer to manipulate the reader's emotions, a temptation Ernaux avoids scrupulously. The result is deeply affecting. Recommended for literary, French, and/or women's studies collections. Mary Paumier Jones, Westminster P.L., CO Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I love Annie Erneaux. Although relatively unknown in the US, she is a famous author in her native country of France. Her books are amazing...intimate, first person narratives; each one about different chapters in her life. (*A Man's Place* is about the life and death of her father; *A Woman's Story* is about the life and death of her mother; *A Frozen Woman* is about her marriage and raising her children when they were young and the way women lose themselves in their marriages and how that led to her divorce; and *Simple Passion* is about an intense love affair she had with a married man.) I really like her writing style; concise and powerful in its brevity; but with such precise detail that you feel like you are there with her. *The Happening* is the story of an illicit abortion she had as a young woman, before abortion was legal. If nothing else, it is an important historical document of what women faced during that time period and lends weight and support, in graphic detail, to the absolute necessity of safe, legal abortion. But the funny thing is that this message is conveyed without the author ever mentioning it once.

Annie Ernaux is a wonderful writer! Diana Decker

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