Author Jennifer Weiner plumbs her own tortuous path to happily ever after | By Hilary Danailova

I f Jennifer Weiner hadn’t been a best-selling novelist, a popular critic of gender and culture on The New York Times opinion page and a regular guest on television morning programs, she could have been a standup comic.

“Funny” is a word nearly everyone uses to describe Weiner, and within minutes of settling into an iced coffee at a café near her Philadelphia home, Weiner is cracking one-liners and sounding off with phrases too spicy to print.

“She’s super funny,” said Stephanie Harzewski, a professor of English and women’s studies at the University of New Hampshire, whose 2011 book, Chick Lit and Postfeminism, surveys the genre of which Weiner is perhaps the best-known practitioner.

“Very funny,” concurred Weiner’s good friend and fellow novelist, Eligible author Curtis Sittenfeld, who bonded initially with Weiner in 2006 over a shared love of reality television and, later, as mothers of daughters.

But as the title of Weiner’s sensational first novel, Good in Bed, suggests, there’s an ironic, even melancholy tinge to that humor. She exhibits a sensibility that’s integral to her identity as a Jewish writer, and one that pervades her newest book, the memoir and essay collection Hungry Heart: Adventures in Life, Love, and Writing.

Following right on the heels of her first children’s title—the tween novel The Littlest Bigfoot—Hungry Heart is alternately tragic and side-splittingly comic, as Weiner finds the humor in a life of extravagant success punctuated with pain. In her 13 fiction titles, Weiner’s mostly Jewish protagonists have dealt with addiction, infertility, suburban anorexic and romantic rejection. And as Hungry Heart reveals, the author’s own life has had more of its share of drama.

In her memoir, Weiner, 46, makes public for the first time that her estranged physician father died a drug addict, leaving behind a secret late-in-life child, and details how her mother subsequently came out as a lesbian. We discover that the famously zaftig author—whose #wearttheswimsuit social media campaign championed body acceptance—had successful weight-loss surgery a decade ago, after years of fruitless diets.

The novelist famous for happy endings plumbs her own tortuous path to happily ever after: a divorce from Philadelphia attorney Adam Bonin, the father of her two children, followed by a miscarriage with the writer Bill Syken, whom she had dated in her 20s and reconnected with years later. The two were married last year. In between, we learn the true story of an ex-boyfriend whose callous behavior fueled the plot of Good in Bed.

Weight struggles aside, it is all heavy stuff. So why put it out there? Why not just write another work of fiction, with all of what Weiner calls “the plausible deniability”?

“I want people to feel connected, to feel less alone,” she explained, adding that she wrote the kind of book she had yearned for in her own loneliest hours. “I wish there’d been a book that told me, it’s not going to go the way you think it is. You’re not the only one,” she said, recalling some of the more difficult periods detailed in the memoir—the isolation and self-loathing Weiner felt after childbirth and the utter confusion of learning her divorced, middle-aged mom had fallen in love with a woman she met at a Jewish community center. “Not every story has the ending you think it’s going to have. And you go on, even when it’s hard.”

Good in Print

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JENNIFER WEINER

COURTESY OF JENNIFER WEINER

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