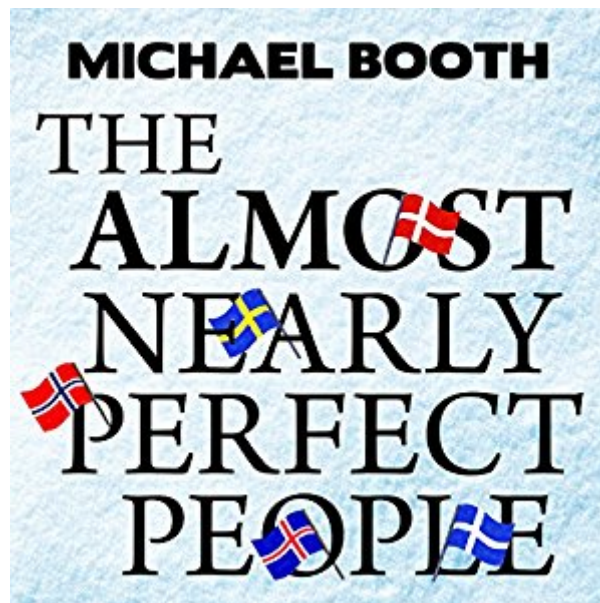




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The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind The Myth Of The Scandinavian Utopia



Synopsis

Journalist Michael Booth has lived among the Scandinavians for more than 10 years, and he has grown increasingly frustrated with the rose-tinted view of this part of the world offered up by the Western media. In this timely audiobook, he leaves his adopted home of Denmark and embarks on a journey through all five of the Nordic countries to discover who these curious tribes are, the secrets of their success, and, most intriguing of all, what they think of one another. Why are the Danes so happy, despite having the highest taxes? Do the Finns really have the best education system? Are the Icelanders as feral as they sometimes appear? How are the Norwegians spending their fantastic oil wealth? And why do all of them hate the Swedes? In *The Almost Nearly Perfect People*, Michael Booth explains who the Scandinavians are, how they differ and why, and what their quirks and foibles are; and he explores why these societies have become so successful and models for the world. Along the way a more nuanced, often darker picture emerges of a region plagued by taboos, characterized by suffocating parochialism, and populated by extremists of various shades. They may very well be almost nearly perfect, but it isn't easy being Scandinavian.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 13 hours 15 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: April 22, 2015

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00WAFRDR6

Best Sellers Rank: #28 in Books > Travel > Europe > Iceland #56 in Books > History > Europe > Scandinavia #166 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Travel

Customer Reviews

The Nordic countries make up five countries located in northern Europe: Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland. As author Michael Booth posits, despite the fact that these countries often rank highest in the world in terms of quality of life (with Denmark almost always being rated the "happiest" country in the world), most people know little about them or what differentiates them. In his home of Denmark, for example, he says that people can discuss the affairs of other countries,

but doubts anyone in the U.S. Congress could name the Danish Foreign Minister. Or he challenges the reader to name someone, anybody, from Finland. In this book, he travels around these five countries, exploring their cultural curiosities, and trying to learn a bit about what makes them tick. One of the strongest points of this book is that he explores the different cultures of these countries through his own eyes and writes as such. Because of this, the writing can often be quite funny. Booth shares some lighthearted jokes the residents of one country have at the expense of others. Or his uncomfortable experience of visiting a Finnish sauna for the first time. But, aside from the humor, you get a sense of the pride many people take in their countries. One memorable example is the Constitution Day celebrations that take place on May 17 in Norway where people dress up in ways that invoke a romantic image of the past. Booth notes how immigrants to Norway, despite little to no connection to this history, heartily embrace it. More serious matters are also of importance. Booth dedicates some time at looking at the horrific terrorist attack of the extreme-right wing Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik in 2011 and the effect it had on the country. Surprisingly, as terrible as the attack was, there was not a lot of permanent change. There was no new security put in place and life went on. Booth also explores some of the aspects of the Nordic countries' famous welfare states and how that works. I found the section on Sweden in this regard most interesting. In Sweden, Booth sees a system he refers to as "benign totalitarianism" where the Swedish government heavily intervenes in the lives of its citizens, even interfering in parenting. There is debate if this just creates too much dependency on the state and stifles the individual or if it releases the individual from worries allowing him or her to become truly individualistic. One objective of this book, as the title implies, is looking past the utopian image these countries sometime have. They are not without problems. This was especially apparent in Iceland where years of economic mismanagement culminated in a severe financial crisis in the late 2000s. He also wonders whether the current system of welfare is sustainable in the long run without changes. Denmark and Sweden already have a tax system that most Americans, for example, would find absolutely preposterous. All of these countries also face the situation, as many other countries are also experiencing, of an aging population. In his own home of Denmark he also notes problems in education, healthcare, and an increasingly lazy workforce. Though most of this book is pretty interesting, I do find that sometimes Booth's own opinion is presented too much as fact. Sure, this is fine when looking at the cultural aspects. He is not afraid to express his own opinion of what is great and what he finds is rather odious. However, it seems like he sometimes tries to poke holes in things he learned from interviews with experts. Many times in this book he talks with people associated with universities and other such professionals. Surely there ideas are worth something. He also throws in criticisms

of things like right-wing political parties and people he just seems to disagree with. Learning about the Nordic countries is especially prudent today. For example, in his campaign for President of the United States, Bernie Sanders has often espoused the so-called "Nordic Model" as something America should emulate. There are certainly interesting things to learn about what has worked and what has not from these countries. Still, besides the serious content, this is an entertaining look at five European countries and I would recommend this to those looking to learn a little bit about the world around them.

And to think that we all thought Scandinavia is a utopia. Booth does a good job of filling a ton of blanks about the history of the Countries and the probability of the reasons they are who they are today. Each of the five Countries is adequately discussed complete with little "in" jokes about each. I was surprised at the access he had and the number of politicians, experts in ethnic studies and dignitaries. It's a good read and makes me want to go back to "Viking" land to do more exploring on my own.

Booth has some definite bias but the book is a fun read if you take things with a grain of salt on top of your lefse!

Now I know why we left the old country. Michael Booth's new survey of the Nordic lands is a feisty, funny, trip that enlightens as it entertains. The English travel and food writer has a long-standing connection to Denmark through his wife, and the book originated in his chagrin at Denmark's consistent rating as the world's happiest, most progressive society. "They don't look that happy to me," he thought, and what results is Booth's frank and acerbic levering up of the great assumptions about these cultures' superiority to take a peek at what squirms about in the shadows beneath them. As he travels through Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden, Booth does an admirable job of blending reportage, anecdote, and historical contextualization to present a balanced sketch of each society. This is a tricky business as Booth plumbs the national stereotypes for validity, and confronts his own ingrained generalizations, revealing a much bumpier, more complex reality. Not that this is an expose or stab job. Booth is keen to remind the reader that in a world where poverty, conflict, disease, and injustice are par for the course, the problems of the highly developed, affluent North are relatively minor. Additionally, he espouses the virtues that makes these societies work

trustworthiness, accountability, openness, a strong civil society, long-termism, individual self-control. However, those of Scandinavian heritage raised with an intimidating sense of where they came from will find this study a big fat relief -- as some of these stereotypes are all too grounded in fact. For instance, it seems that Danes are not the most happy, they are simply the best at pretending that everything is just fine. The Norwegians come off as not-too-bright, right-wing tribalists rendered effete by their vast oil revenues. Iceland? Vikings led astray into modern financial incoherence by their piratical tendencies. Finland is portrayed as composed of tough, taciturn binge-drinkers. And Sweden, the economic leader of them all, is a stultifyingly conformist culture, the ultimate nanny state, with an enormous immigrant problem. In fact, the problems of multiculturalism crop up again and again in

Almost. These host cultures are incredibly homogenous, not just culturally but genetically. The need for workers willing to do the mundane tasks that keep things running falls more and more to refugees, and inclusive philosophies are being tested now up North, with intermittent success. Enforcing tolerance and avoiding racial stratification is the new challenge. The overall sense that Booth leaves the reader with is that, like a typical American suburb, Scandinavia is a nice place to be from. The traits I thought were my family's alone are more broadly based. The aversion to conflict, the lack of emotionality, the stiff politesse, the smugness, the non-specific gloominess, the nagging sense of personal unimportance, the shyness, the yearning for universal approval, and wielding relentless, lethal niceness as a weapon all are found among the people Booth meets on his way. Booth quotes journalist Niels Lillelund -- "In Denmark we do not raise the inventive, the hardworking, the ones with initiative, the successful or the outstanding, we create hopelessness, helplessness and the sacred, ordinary mediocrity," and The Economist

"Scandinavia is a great place in which to be born . . . but only if you are average. . . . if you are extraordinary, if you have big dreams, great visions, or are just a bit different, you will be crushed, if you do not emigrate first. Why leave heaven? Well, if for you it's hell. The idea that these "perfect" societies tend to iron out or exclude the unique, eccentric, and enterprising individual makes me understand why my dissatisfied, grumpy, free-thinking ancestors got the hell out of there. Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling" has more than a dollop of truth in it. Of course, Booth's observations have stirred debate, as they should. "Almost" is great look below the surface.

I enjoyed the book as an interesting comparison between Scandinavian countries and the US. There were some very interesting ideas expressed and explained. I think it's a good read for those who hold the Scandinavians up as the perfect example of what life should be. We could learn from some of their examples. I don't think the homogeneity is something I would appreciate.

Great read. With Scandanavia constantly quoted whenever the media want to give an example of the perfect model it's nice to read about the people whom we know so little about. Funny too. An easy read.

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