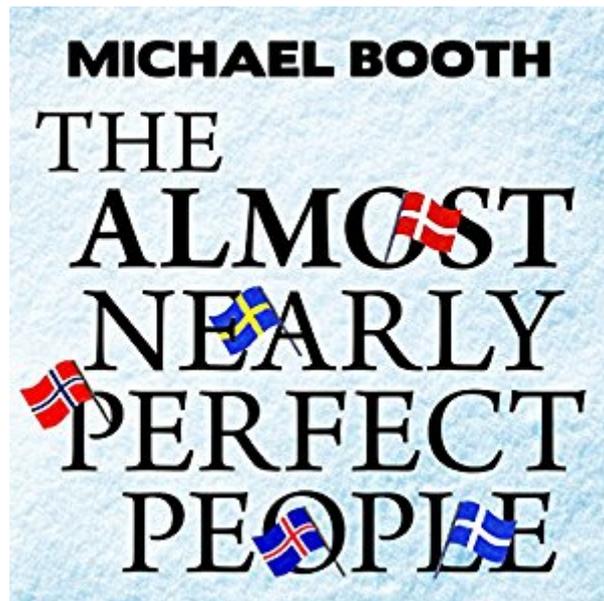


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# The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind The Myth Of The Scandinavian Utopia



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

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 – 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.

This was a highly informative and at the same time fun (as in LOL funny) read. I will be making my first visit to four of the five Nordic countries later this year. Unlike one reviewer here, I did not find the book biased at all. Booth points out the faults and rivalries amongst these five nations, but he certainly doesn't hold back high praise for them, either. In fact, he concludes by saying he hopes these five nations never form a Nordic Union, because if they do, the rest of us don't have a chance. High praise indeed for what the people of these small nations have accomplished, something far beyond their small populations (California has more people than do these five Nordic nations combined). I found the book to be remarkably balanced, and it has increased my interest in the region enough to want to read more books about the Nordic people. I would highly recommend this book to anyone planning to visit the region, or who is just interested in the Nordic nations. This is the kind of book that I believe even natives would find both interesting and entertaining.

The book is an excellent overview of Scandinavia, and as someone who moved to Sweden 20 years ago, I'm simply amazed by the breadth and depth of the author's knowledge of each of these very diverse countries: he's managed to dig beneath the (often very orchestrated and carefully controlled) propaganda and spin, and uncover much more of the real experience of living in these dark and often inhospitable lands. A few small things bothered me about the book. Firstly, I certainly got the feeling that familiarity has bred contempt - so most of Booth's disapprobation is aimed specifically at the Danes. As I very often visit Denmark to experience the country's much more relaxed lifestyle, better manners, vastly superior food, and nicer architecture than Stockholm, much of the barbed commentary aimed exclusively at his fellow Danes seemed contrived and sometimes bordering on sour grapes. In a similar vein, Booth often refers glowingly to the reforms implemented in the Swedish welfare system - comparing them favorably to what he seems to consider Danish public profligacy. But he fails to look beyond the neoliberal spin and see that the semi-privatized Swedish health system is falling apart, the Free Schools are draining massive amounts of public money into private hands while performing abysmally, we've even seen

the nightmare spectacle of sick people quite literally dying while begging the (privatized) emergency service to send a (privatized) ambulance , and in general the major winners from the changes have been a small band of companies and individuals, while the overall tax burden on the vast majority hasn't changed significantly, in return for much worse results. In any case, overall I liked Booth's perceptive look at Scandinavian society - and particularly enjoyed the Swedish chapters. As an incomer from the self-deprecating British middle-class (self-reflexively running down British towns, mores and institutions as a matter of ingrained habit) it comes as something of a shock that Swedes are totally and unshakeably convinced of the overwhelming superiority of - well basically everything Swedish. This is held to be true even when the evidence shows otherwise. So if you're willing to grit your teeth and accept frequent lectures on that basis (and being seen to even slightly question this thesis will cause barely hidden resentment and bad feeling - almost the only time you'll see a Swede visibly annoyed) then the other positive aspects of Scandinavian society (consensus, good work ethic, minimal conflict, civilized if rather boring city life) will all combine to give you a pretty nice, contented, but mostly unexciting Scandinavian existence - and Booth's book forms a useful and amusing primer.

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