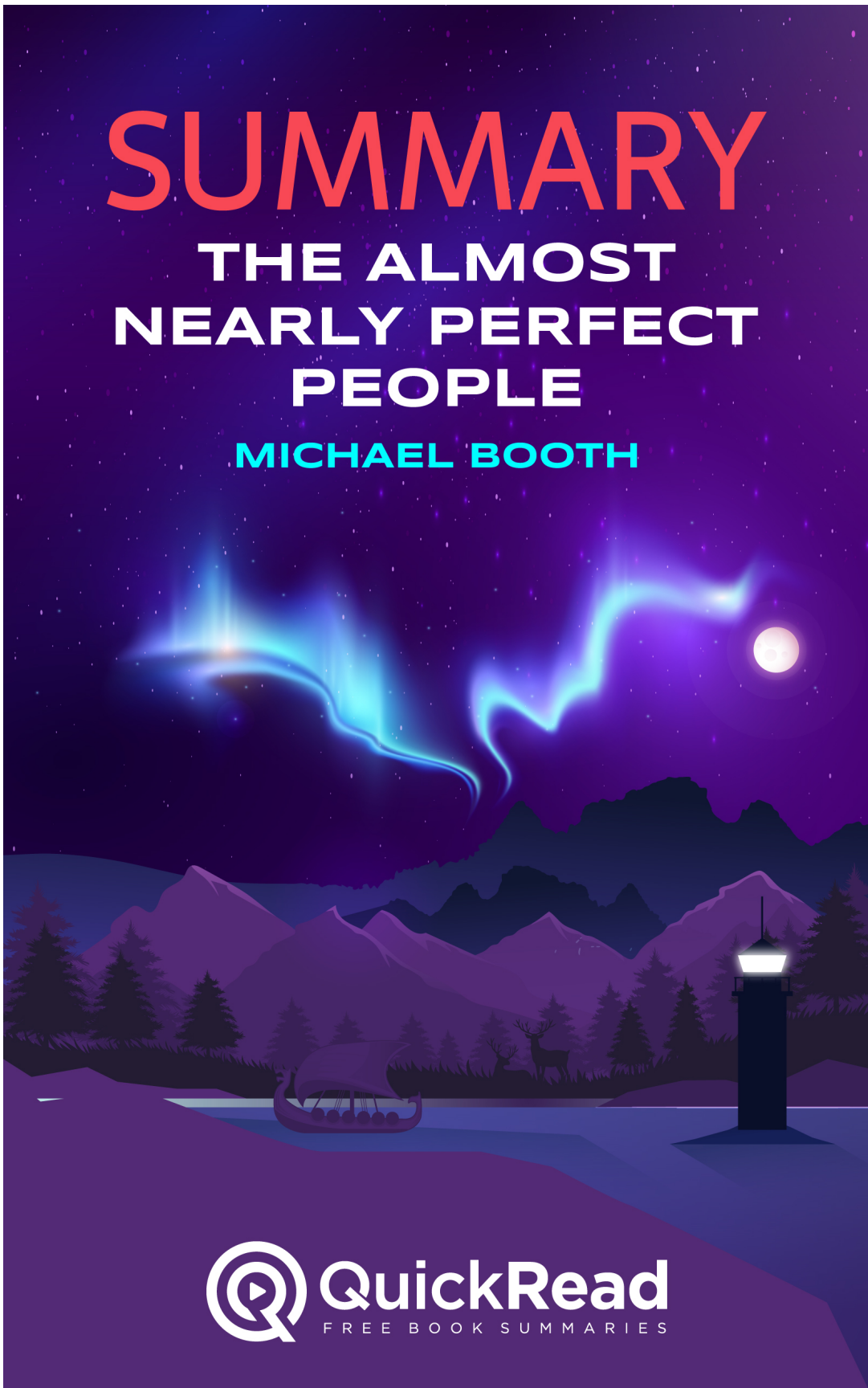


# SUMMARY

## THE ALMOST NEARLY PERFECT PEOPLE

MICHAEL BOOTH



# **Summary of “The Almost Nearly Perfect People” by Michael Booth**

Written by Alyssa Burnette

The Almost Nearly Perfect People (2014) is author Michael Booth’s exploration of the cultural belief that Scandinavia is a cultural utopia.

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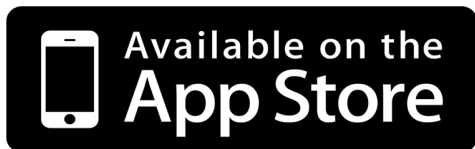


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# Introduction

For hundreds of years, Scandinavia has been considered a haven of almost surreal beauty and perfection. Boasting such national treasures as IKEA, Greta Thunberg, and Viking history, it's easy for us to imagine it as a utopia of peace and progress. But is it really as flawless as we think? Michael Booth wanted to challenge this stereotype, so he took it upon himself to explore all five Nordic countries-- Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland-- to learn more about how our views of Scandinavia originated. So, in this summary, we'll explore Booth's findings and learn:

- What Jante Law is
- The primary faith of Icelanders, and
- Which Nordic country was given an intergalactic award for its beauty

# Why do we Love Nordic Countries so Much?

There's a lot to love about Scandinavia, but perhaps one of the things we're most drawn to is the fact that Nordic nations are among the most equal in the world. Because all the US and UK are rife with gender inequality and discrimination against the poor, Denmark is essentially one middle-class melting pot and there are no gendered words in the Finnish language! And to top it all off, the world's first parliament was founded in Iceland. With all these things put together, it might seem that Scandinavia is indeed the most equal region in the world and the Gini coefficient confirms it!

Developed in 1921 by Italian statistician Corrado Gini, the Gini Coefficient is a statistical method designed to develop the wealth distribution in any nation. It accomplishes its purpose by measuring the range of income differences between a country's richest population and its poorest and it determines its results by marking the smallest differences. In other words, the smaller the discrepancy between rich and poor, the more equal the country! The Gini Coefficient is still in operation today as a yearly survey and although the rankings fluctuate with each yearly census, one thing remains consistent: the five Nordic countries always place in the world's top six.

So, how did they achieve this stellar reputation? The author believes that this might be a legacy inherited from their Viking ancestors who--allegedly-- were some of the world's strongest proponents of egalitarianism. (When they weren't conquering people against their will and slaughtering them, of course. We can't all be perfect, I guess!) However, even if they were notoriously violent, the Vikings were also known for their advances in gender equality and the Scandinavian people continue to uphold this tradition today. In fact, in 2010, the nonprofit organization Save the Children ranked Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and Denmark as one of the "top five best places to be a mother." Likewise, in 2011, Newsweek rated Iceland and Sweden as the world's top two best places to be a woman. And they've definitely got that right! Finnish women won the right to vote in 1906,

which made them the first women in Europe to vote. And today, not only is half the Swedish parliament female, it's quite normal for women to serve as Prime Minister and President of Finland.

And in another brilliant win for their culture of equality, worldwide surveys have ranked Swedish men as the least chauvinistic in the world. So much so, in fact, that one former Miss Sweden winner once controversially described the men of her country as “nappy-changing sissies.” So, maybe everyone isn't a fan, but one thing is indisputable: Scandinavian nations are doing something right when it comes to national equality. But is it really so simple?

## What's Love Got to do With It?

How often do you say, "I love you?" If you're like me, you probably say it all the time and to everyone from your partner to your favorite cheesecake. But you might want to think twice before dropping the "L-word" around your Finnish partner. That's because Nordic cultures prize a certain degree of reticence and the value of this trait only intensifies the farther North you go. In fact, in Finnish culture, the word "shy" doesn't have the negative connotations at play in our society; it's actually prized as a cultural virtue! The Finnish people are also notoriously untalkative and nothing highlights this fact better than a story one Finnish man told the author.

As the story goes, this man and his brother were once driving down a country road during a blizzard when their car broke down. Fortunately, they were lucky enough that another Finn happened by and helped them out-- but he didn't say a word while doing so! The man later learned that his brother and the helpful stranger had actually known each other since elementary school! If you're like me-- or like pretty much anybody, really!-- you might find it really weird to see a friend you've known for years and not say a word. But in Finnish culture, it's completely (and bafflingly) normal!

And the cultural peculiarities aren't limited to Finland. In Sweden, for example, their language includes a word-- *duktig*-- which translates as "clever" but is specifically used to denote the sort of cleverness that enables one to avoid conflict or bullying. The author discovered that this virtue is actually so prized that Danish people are sometimes brought in as managers in Swedish companies because they're willing to take charge and make unpopular decisions. But how did this cultural reticence start? And why is it considered a good thing? The author posits that this might be a remnant of Lutheran influence in Scandinavia. An austere and very conservative form of Christianity developed by the German monk Martin Luther in the sixteenth century, Lutheranism must have resonated strongly with early Scandinavian people. In fact, records show that early Swedish



and Danish kings embraced it so profoundly as to make it the national religion.

And even though only 2.5% of modern Scandinavians attend church today, it's clear that the influence of Lutheranism is still felt today. And that's why everyone the author interviewed understood a good deal about Jante Law. This law originated from a 1933 novel, *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks*, penned by Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose. In his fictional town of Jante, the inhabitants were governed by a set of laws which included such examples as, "You shall not believe that you are more important than we (your people or community) are," and "You shall not believe that you are someone." And from these examples, we can clearly see how Scandinavian culture condemns overt expression of individuality or personal pride.

# The Problem With National Pride

There's nothing wrong with having a strong sense of national pride; it's great to be proud of your culture and heritage! And when your culture shares a lot of similarities with that of other nations, it can lead to a strong sense of unity and collaboration. This is precisely the case with the five Nordic countries, all of whom are what anthropologist Edward T. Hall calls "high-context cultures." And because they all have a great deal in common, they have less of a need for active communication and the spread of new ideas. After all, just consider the Finns! Despite their homogenous population-- which boasts a shocking immigrant percentage of only 2.5-- they're also notoriously untalkative. As a result, it's unsurprising that there might not be a lot of cultural exchange going on.

And sadly, even though his actions can clearly be labeled as those of a religious extremist, in 2011, Anders Breivik murdered 77 people in two calculated attacks as a way of protesting non-Western immigration in Norway. In so doing, he not only highlighted a worrying subculture of Islamophobia in Norway, he also doubled the nation's annual homicide rate in just one day. And even more worryingly, Breivik was a member of the alt-right Progress Party, an organization which had once proudly declared that all Muslims are terrorists. Despite their blatantly wrong-- and xenophobic-- stance, they still somehow managed to garner 16.3% of the vote in parliamentary elections a scant two years after the attack. This support encouraged other ultra-right wing groups to come forward in a twisted form of support, arguing that Breivik's actions were the result of multiculturalism, as though the formation of a multicultural society inherently incites violence!

Alas, this problem is not unique to Norway. Sweden and Denmark have their own troubles with xenophobia and it also comes from the top. Although their name might evoke positive connotations in the United States, the Sweden Democrats are actually a right-wing party who, regrettably, won 20 seats in the parliamentary election. And given that one

of their primary campaign promises including “cutting immigration by 90%,” this development leaves no room for the imagination; it’s clear that Scandinavian countries have a problem with xenophobia. So, while they may have a number of other significant advantages like their stance on gender equality and sustainable living, Scandinavian countries certainly aren’t flawless!

# The Turbulent History of Iceland

In the year 930, the world's first parliament-- called the Althing-- was built in a narrow Icelandic canyon named Thingvellir which was created by the tectonic plates of Europe and North America as they slowly separated. So, quite literally, the first-ever parliament was formed at the place where America and Scandinavia meet! So, what did such a merging of cultures look like? Well, for starters, the Icelandic people still embrace a great deal of their Viking heritage and cherish a strong belief in the relationship between nature and mythology. As a result, many of them still believe in elves. If you're wondering exactly how many people that constitutes, it's a whopping 54.4% of the Icelandic population! (By contrast, however, only 45% believe in the existence of God).

If you find yourself wondering why certain elements of their heritage survived to the present day, the author suggests that one reason might be the remote nature of Iceland's landscape. This would have made it difficult for the seventeenth-century Christian missionaries who visited the rest of Scandinavia to reach them in their quest to "stamp out pagan beliefs." But in addition to being very remote, the Icelandic landscape is also very unforgiving. In addition to being covered by glaciers, mountains, waterfalls, and volcanoes, it's also home to some highly volatile and frightening weather. In fact, the weather is so extreme that it actually served as population control for a number of years, with the elements keeping the population under the tens of thousands for most of Iceland's history.

In light of that, it's no surprise that those who survived such extreme conditions might have needed to embrace a bit of magic in addition to cultivating the traditional Viking "heart of steel." However, they also acquired a few cultural traits from the United States!

Because Iceland was temporarily occupied by American forces during the Second World War, the relatively poor island experienced an unexpected burst of economic prosperity. A bit of American culture also rubbed off as well and the author thinks this is due in large part to the influence of the

classic American Dream which holds that you can make your own fortune and build the life of your dreams. This can be seen in Icelandic culture during the early 2000s when they attempted a number of “get rich quick” schemes by trying to conquer the international money market.

In their efforts, the three major Icelandic banks-- Glitnir, Kaupthing, and Landsbanki-- borrowed more than \$140 billion between 2003 and 2008. To give you an idea of just how unwise this decision was, their debt totalled more than ten times Iceland's GDP (or gross domestic product) and created a very flimsy economic bubble. Unfortunately, the bubble quickly burst with the collapse of the Lehman Brothers in 2008 and created a massive national debt. As a result, inflation reached 20% and Iceland's unemployment rates skyrocketed from their usual steady 2% to 10%. On the bright side, however, their economy is now recovering, proving that this quirky, remote little island can survive both extreme weather and economic pressure.

# Norway's Distinctive Culture

Remember how, earlier, we mentioned that one Scandinavian country won an intergalactic award for its natural beauty? It's necessarily not a real award, but it originated in Douglas Adams' beloved sci-fi tale *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* when the character Slartibartfast wins an award for his work on "designing" the Norwegian fjords. And in addition to attracting international attention for their natural beauty, the fjords have also led the Norwegian people to develop a deep and lasting attachment to their environment.

In fact, many words in the Norwegian language-- including people's surnames-- are derived from the landscape or other aspects of the physical environment. For example, the surname of Yngve Slyngstad, the head of Norway's oil investment fund, derives from a bend in the river on his father's farm! And in recent years, a number of new TV programs have experienced raging success simply because they feature cameras attached to ferries or trains which are travelling the Norwegian landscape. In fact, they were so popular that they were even featured on Danish TV stations, prompting a few Norwegians to joke that they were presenting the shows because of "mountain envy."

And although you might not think of Norway as an oil-rich country, its vast oil reserves have also made the country home to some of the richest people in the world. That's because Norway has produced a massive amount of oil since it first discovered its natural oil reserves in the North Sea in 1969. Today, it continues to ship around 730 million barrels every year. And in 2011, Norway actually superseded the United Arab Emirates as the country with the largest amount of sovereign wealth in the world with a value of \$600 billion! But to return to our earlier discussion on income equality in Scandinavian countries, you'll be pleased to know that, because the nation's oil fund is entirely controlled by the state, that massive amount of wealth always makes its way back to the people!

# Denmark is Actually the Happiest Country in the World

Studies suggest that the more equal a country is, the happier its citizens are. So, given that the people of Denmark have repeatedly voted themselves as being the happiest people in the world, you might expect that they would have the strongest adherence to the Gini Coefficient. But in fact, when it comes to many forms of equality that the Gini Coefficient prizes, Denmark actually ranks last on a regular basis! So, why are the people all so happy? Well, one thing's for sure: it can't be because of their public infrastructure! It might surprise you to learn that Denmark actually has the highest tax rates in the world, ranging from 58-72% depending on income! And I don't know about you, but as a general rule, taxes don't make me very happy!

But you might assume that the Danish people can make up for this through stellar public services and benefits. Surprisingly, however, despite the fact that their welfare state has grown by nearly 2% every year for the past 30-40 years, the United Nations Human Development Index-- which ranks factors like gross income, education, and life expectancy-- consistently scores Denmark sixteenth on their list, behind countries like Ireland and South Korea, neither of which are particularly well known for their quality of life. Shockingly, Denmark even has the lowest life expectancy in Scandinavia and the highest cancer rates in the world!

So, how on earth are these people the happiest? Well, it might be because of their social cohesion, a factor so strong that every other social ill pales in comparison. Because if the Finns are notorious for keeping to themselves, the Danish people treated their confining borders and small size as an opportunity to come closer together. They united so much, in fact, that they're actually known as one of the most sociable people groups in the world, with 43% of the population over 16 proudly reporting that they belong to some form of social club or association, whether that's a local gardening club or their trade union. Denmark also invented the concept of "hygge," which translates to "cozy," but in practice, is really more about a

social atmosphere where everyone is equal, laid back, and prioritizes enjoying nice things together.

It just goes to show you that even if there are a variety of flaws in your climate or social infrastructure, sometimes those aren't the definitive factors in your happiness. Instead, sometimes it's more about the company you keep and the genuine pleasure of enjoying your community. So, no matter what might be wrong with the health care or governmental elements of Denmark, it's the love and joy that people share with one another that makes them the happiest country in the world.



## Final Summary

If you're reading this in the United States, you've probably been tempted to romanticize Scandinavian culture at one point or another. But despite its fascinating history of natural beauty, social equality, and unique inventions, in truth, it's not a perfect place. Although its rich legacy of Viking culture has created a strong sense of national pride and the five Scandinavian countries have a great deal in common, this can sometimes lead to an overly homogenous population which is skeptical of outsiders and overtly xenophobic. Likewise, Scandinavian culture is often hesitant to reward individuality or an outgoing personality.

But no place is without its flaws and just because it isn't perfect, we shouldn't admire Scandinavian countries any less. Instead, we should appreciate their unique cultural identity, one which has brought a great deal of happiness to their inhabitants and made Scandinavian countries some of the most progressive and successful in the world.



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