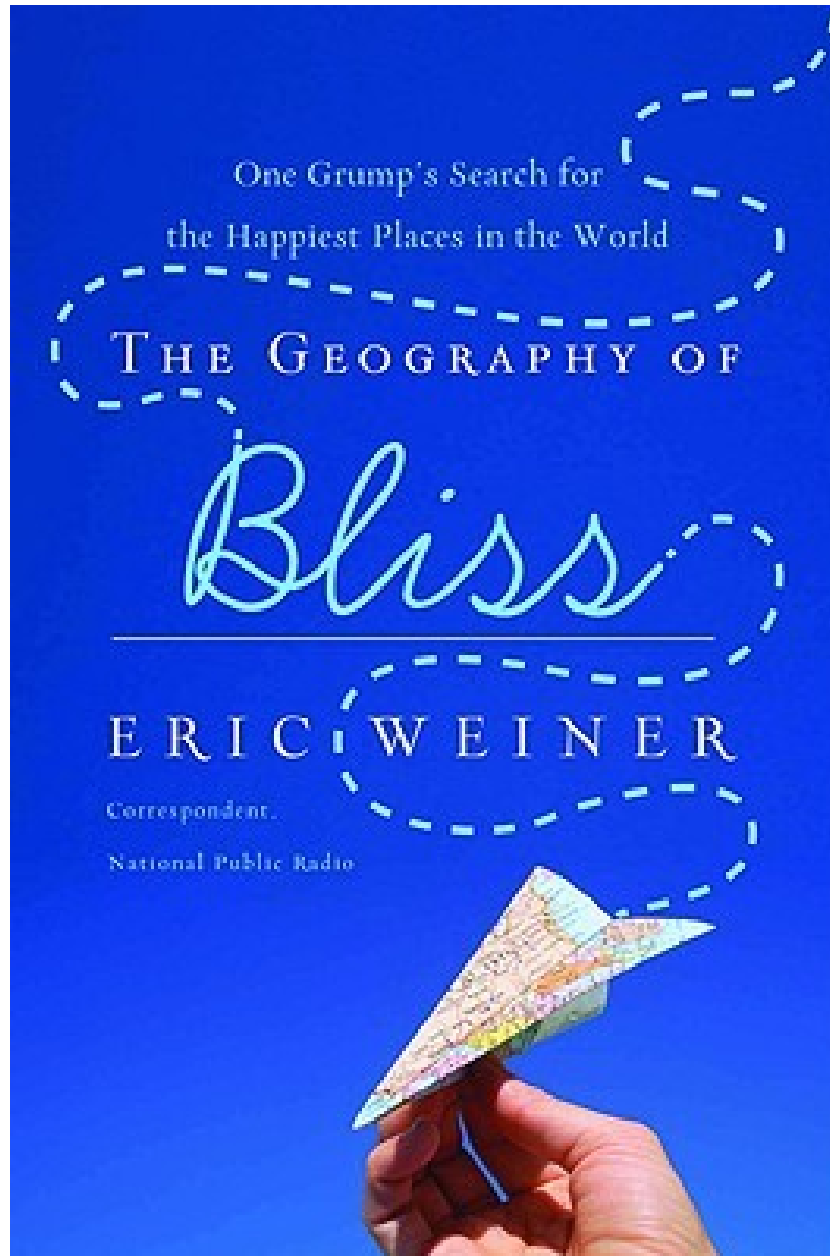


The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World Book PDF Download



By:
Eric Weiner

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What people Say:

Jenny

This was a very interesting book. It's about happiness, a subject that I never realized I thought about so much. Most of my thinking is subconscious, but throughout this book I kept questioning myself and trying to decide if I agreed with most of the major ideas. I did. Here's a few of the highlights:

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"Extroverts are happier than introverts; optimists are happier than pessimists (shocking!); married people are happier than singles (certainly in Utah), though people with children are no happier than childless couples (surprising); Republicans are happier than Democrats (I'll have to ask Jeff about that one); people who attend religious services are happier than those who do not; people with college degrees are happier than those without, though people with advanced degrees are less happy than those with just a BA (damn that MBA); people with an active sex life are happier than those without (no comment); women and men are equally happy, though women have a wider emotional range; having an affair will make you happy but will not compensate for the massive loss of happiness that you will incur when your spouse finds out and leaves you; people are the least happy when they're commuting to work (I could have told you that); busy people are happier than those with too little to do (could have told you that too); wealthy people are happier than poor ones, but only slightly (surprising)."

Most of all this book made me want to travel. I'd love to really spend some time in different countries, and get to know the people and their culture. My brief stay in London taught me invaluable lessons (some of which shall not be named here), but one major lesson I learned was that people in foreign countries think differently. I knew they dressed differently, ate differently, talked differently, but realizing that they THOUGHT differently was an important revelation. It's made me more tolerant.

Another particular point that stood out was the concept of thinking. We certainly believe that thinking and analysis are important, but the Thais don't think so. One of their expressions is "Don't think too much." I like this concept. I know, I'm a teacher, I should encourage thinking. And I do. I think that examining ideas, literature, cultures, politics, etc. is very important. I'm grateful to my higher level math classes for helping me to think through complex topics. However, I think many of us have taken it too far. Think just a minute about Seinfeld. The show drives me crazy. I know everyone

everywhere loves this show, but it just makes me tense. They spend the entire show talking about nothing, nitpicking every detail of everything. And they're miserable. You know they are. We're told that the examined life is a good life, but I think that can go too far. I'm not advocating ignorance, stupidity, or small-mindedness; I'm just saying that most of what we spend our lives thinking and worrying about doesn't really matter. As a side note, they don't sell a lot of self-help books in Thailand, or England, or anywhere else really other than the U.S.

Here were Weiner's conclusions: "Money matters, but less than we think and not in the way that we think. Family is important. So are friends. Envy is toxic. So is excessive thinking. Beaches are optional. Trust is not. Neither is gratitude....Our happiness is completely and utterly intertwined with other people: family and friends and neighbors and the woman you hardly notice who cleans your office. Happiness is not a noun or a verb. It's a conjunction. Connective tissue."

I like that. I put this book down with a sigh and thought "That was a good book." I'll try not to overthink it now.

Jason Koivu

A sourpuss Weiner travels the world and wonders why the frick everyone's so dang happy. And I thought I was a grump!

This was actually a very fun way to "travel the world," by piggybacking Weiner on his quest to discover what might be the reason(s) one nation of people is generally happier or more depressed than another.

A good deal of the book is about the author's own discovery. Some of that is personal and un-relatable, but unless you're the most worldly person of all-time, there will be some

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un-relatable, but unless you're the most worldly person of all-time, there will be corners of the globe touched upon here that will no doubt enlighten a musty-cave portion of your mind. For instance, I thought I knew a thing or two about Iceland, but discovered it was more minimal than I realized. I was sure I didn't know a damn thing about Bhutan or Moldova, but thanks to

I got a better sense of day-to-day life in these places.

Again, these claims of national joy and sorrow are generalizations, therefore much of this should be taken with a grain of salt. Having said that, when you are faced with stats that proclaim a country has a big problem, like say my paternal ancestors' of Finland and their issue with alcoholism and suicide (WE'RE #1!!!), it leads one to lend such studies a certain amount of credibility.

Whether scientific or simply silly, Weiner does at least provide a good deal of entertainment value in the telling of his world-wide trek. If you've read any

, especially

Andy

I will admit that I was initially put off by the title of NPR correspondent Eric Weiner's engaging, highly readable travelogue, *The Geography of Bliss*. That conjunction of the global and the delightful conjured visions of a frequently flying chick lit heroine named, without irony "you guessed it. Thankfully (happily?), the book's title is a minor bump along the road to an otherwise largely satisfying read.

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While the author's self-confessed grumpiness kills any chance of a candy-colored happily ever after, the nature of Weiner's project insures against the opposite extreme: "What if," Weiner writes in his introduction, "I spent a year traveling the globe, seeking out not the world's well-trodden trouble spots but, rather, its unheralded happy places?" Candace Bushnell might not have signed up for the journey, but neither would William T. Vollmann have.

That year of traveling keeps Weiner zigzagging over an impressive swath of the Northern

hemisphere, with junkets to nine countries spread across various geographic regions of Asia and Europe before return to the United States. Along the way, Weiner examines the pithy conventional wisdom on happiness “that it can’t be bought, and so on” and recent findings on the emotional state. Though Weiner hits enough global-travel clichés (a hashish bar in the Netherlands, a sex show in Thailand, an ashram in India) to make his journey recognizable, the best passages aren’t the ones that evoke place or custom but those in which the author taps locals’ minds for interpretation of their cultures’ emotional well-being. In the chapter on Switzerland, “Happiness Is Boredom,” the ongoing dialogue the author conducts with himself, his Swiss contacts and the more canonical wisdom of such thinkers as Bertrand Russell leads to these insights: the urbane Swiss owe no small part of their collective happiness to their relationship with nature, their lack of envy and ostentation to the small town-like close knitting of their social fabric. Whether or not Swiss happiness truly is boredom is another question, one whose cultural components are indirectly alluded to in the image of an ex-pat Hollywood agent nervously thumbing her Blackberry, and surprise from the Swiss that, statistically speaking, they are happy.

The further Weiner travels, geographically and culturally, the more perspicacious his book seems to become about happiness in the United States. This is partly due to the range of farther flung countries he visits. In India, though Weiner does visit that ashram and socialize among the Indian middle class, he of course glimpses that country’s endemic poverty and concludes that, in certain fundamental ways, it is less grinding than extreme poverty in the United States, the Indian “houseless” (as Weiner refers to the indigent of India) maintaining strong social and familial ties all but unknown among the American homeless. On the other hand, the oil kingdom of Qatar is, in Weiner’s analysis, a Wahhabite Brave New World whose dry cultural well is greased with Starbucks coffee. Happiness isn’t, it seems, a reserve of iced mocha vast enough to caffeinate the world for the next hundred years.

But Weiner’s a-ha moment in an exotic country comes during a conversation with Karma Ura, who runs Bhutan’s most important think tank (which, as Weiner notes, “also happens to be Bhutan’s only think tank”). “I have achieved happiness,” Ura tells Weiner, “because I don’t have unrealistic expectations.” This perspective is so opposite Weiner’s own (“In America,” he writes, “high expectations are the force behind our dreams and, by extension, our pursuit of happiness”) that Ura’s expounding temporarily disarms Weiner of his personal guardedness. He drops his guard to tell Ura the story of a recent visit to the hospital, scheduled by the author after he began experiencing numbness in his extremities and shortness of breath; MRI results confirmed that these symptoms were brought on by a panic attack, by hypochondria. “You need to think about death for five minutes every day,” Ura responds. “It will cure you, sanitize you.” His rationale? Human beings must be prepared for death, as most Westerners are not. Ura then reveals that he was once a cancer patient.

“Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so,” wrote John Stuart Mill. Indeed, Weiner’s findings mostly confirm the old adage about the preferability of existing as a happy Forrest Gump rather than as an unhappy Socrates. Weiner relates the story of his firing from the

New York Times, which came a few weeks after the paper's executive editor labeled his work "naïve and unsophisticated." It is only in Iceland, where being naïve is okay because you can always start over, as it's put by a relatively young music producer on his career, that Weiner finally gets over the insult. "The world, I now conclude, would be a far better place with a bit more naïveté," writes Weiner.

But Weiner's book suffers less from simplicity than from not treading certain paths. His travels begin in the Netherlands, with a visit to the Dutch professor who compiles the World Database of Happiness. The ostensibly scientific focus is, for all intents and purposes, mostly forgotten once the WDH has been left behind. And that's a shame. Some of the most interesting, and promising, recent neurology research has focused on the relationship between the brain's structure and its functioning. Could happiness be a well-wired brain? Is it possible to rewire one's brain and thus recalibrate the happiness gauge of one's psyche? That Weiner devotes almost no space to such questions is understandable on the one hand – it's the geography, not the neurology, he's after – and puzzling on the other: as Sharon Begley describes in her book *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain*, neuroscientists are now beginning how meditation practice actually changes the brain's physiology; two of the nine countries Weiner visits are predominantly Buddhist; another the birthplace of the Buddha himself. And geography, like all received stimuli, influences the way we think.

The *Geography of Bliss* ultimately begs larger questions about the nature of happiness. To what extent is happiness a function of culture, and vice versa? And does happiness translate easily from one culture to another? Weiner's findings suggest a negative answer to the latter, as he admits that much of what accounts for the happiness of other cultures would be an acquired taste for most in the United States.

Trish

The subtitle of this book is

, and I am going to cut to the chase and discuss his conclusions. You're going to want to read the book anyway, to figure out how it can be true that a very unlikely country comes in first in the happiness lottery. But do get the audio of this book. The author reads it, and as an NPR commentator, talking is his trade. He is very good at it, and is as funny as David Sedaris in parts of this reading.

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"Happiness is one hundred percent relational," is the conclusion of the author, who quotes Karma Ura, Bhutanese scholar and cancer survivor. We can only be happy with other people, because happiness does not exist in a vacuum. We knew this, but we need to be reminded, perhaps. And there may be basic ingredients that compose happiness, but the final composition will vary around the globe. The author compares happiness to the atom carbon: arrange it one way and it is coal. Arrange it another, and it is a diamond.

I think this (audio)book is a great gift. It makes one laugh and think. It's cheaper than a therapist, safer than drugs or alcohol, and a lot more fun, perhaps, than doing the trip oneself. Although I just might buy a ticket to that place I wouldn't have expected to find on top of the list...

Jessica

Okay, not really fair to post a review, since I'm just more than halfway through (it has to go back to the library now). But: I've read enough to know that I find the book too superficial for my taste. The author covers several countries (so far: Netherlands, Switzerland, Bhutan, Qatar), but there is nothing probing in his method. He stays a few weeks, talks to natives and to ex-pats and forms conclusions. Maybe the topic itself is irritating to me: talk enough about it, and it disappears. This

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enough for me, so....there you have it: I'm a grump when it comes to this book. I expected more enlightenment.