



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

Eric Weiner

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Weiner spent a decade as a foreign correspondent reporting from such discontented locales as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Indonesia. Unhappy people living in profoundly unstable states, he notes, inspire pathos and make for good copy, but not for good karma. So Weiner, admitted grump and self-help book aficionado, undertook a year's research to travel the globe, looking for the "unheralded happy places." The result is this book, equal parts laugh-out-loud funny and philosophical, a journey into both the definition of and the destination for true contentment.

Apparently, the happiest places on earth include, somewhat unexpectedly, Iceland, Bhutan, and India. Weiner also visits the country deemed most malcontent, Moldova, and finds real merit in the claim.

But the question remains: What makes people happy? Is it the freedom of the West or the myriad restrictions of Singapore? The simple ashrams of India or the glittering shopping malls of Qatar?

From the youthful drunkenness of Iceland to the despond of Slough, a sad but resilient town in Heathrow's flight path, Weiner offers wry yet profound observations about the way people relate to circumstance and fate.

Both revealing and inspirational, perhaps the best thing about this hilarious trip across four continents is that for the reader, the "geography of bliss" is wherever they happen to find themselves while reading it.

The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World **Details**

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From Reader Review The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World for online ebook

Christina says

A book everyone should read. It's not sappy, lame or filled with useless information. It's not the kind of book where for ten minutes I feel awesome and then forget about it. It's a re-evaluation of happiness. Happiness is transient and complicated. It's fleeting, yet in our field of vision at all times. If I may use such a cliché, this is a profound study of what makes us happy; and right now, it's a cup of coffee and my dog. That's all I need at this very moment. Who knows what it will be in the next hour; but for now, I'm in the moment and it feels good.

Susan Johnson says

I was surprised at some of the happiest places on Earth and not surprised at others. I remember when I first read Alexander McCall Smith's Number 1 Ladies Detective Agency and was surprised at how happy they were in Botswana. It just goes to show that there are many factors that make people happy. I mean both Qatar and Bhutan are two of the happiest places and they are very different. It's an interesting perspective.

David says

This is a late entry in the glut of “science of happiness” books that peaked a couple of years ago. The best among those books was Daniel Gilbert’s “Stumbling on Happiness” and, while this book is not without a certain charm of its own, it poses no serious threat to Gilbert’s supremacy. It might seem as if this ground has already been covered more than adequately, but Weiner is smart enough to have come up with a reasonably appealing, and effective, gimmick. Instead of just giving yet another presentation of the experimental work and its conclusions, he packages his whole investigation as a travel memoir. As a correspondent for NPR, Weiner spent ample time reporting from the world’s trouble spots. He bases his exploration of happiness on the following hypothetical question:

“What if I spent a year traveling the globe seeking out ... the world’s ... unheralded happy places? Places that possess one or more of the ingredients that we consider essential to the hearty stew of happiness: money, pleasure, spirituality, family, and chocolate, among others.”

So he began by traveling to Rotterdam to meet with Ruut Verhoeven, “Professor of Happiness Studies”, who grants him access to the “World Database of Happiness”, the largest and most comprehensive repository of quantitative data about the relative happiness of people in different countries around the world. Weiner describes the research findings as “*alternatively obvious and counterintuitive, expected and surprising*”. He proceeds with a thumbnail sketch of the effects of key factors on happiness:

“Extroverts are happier than introverts; optimists are happier than pessimists; married people are happier than singles... ; Republicans are happier than Democrats; ... people with college degrees are happier than those without, though people with advanced degrees are less happy than those with just a BA; people with an active sex life are happier...; 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 you

will incur when your spouse finds out and leaves you; wealthy people are happier than poor ones, but only slightly.”

It seems that Weiner was really suffering from severe wanderlust, because he provides only a perfunctory discussion of the results summarized above, focusing instead on trying to get a geographical handle on happiness, that is, to identify countries at the high and low extremes of the distribution of happiness scores. This leads him to the choice of countries he reports on in the book: Switzerland, Bhutan, Qatar, Iceland, Moldova, Thailand, Great Britain, India, and the U.S. These particular destinations seem to have been chosen partly for their utility in helping to illustrate key results gleaned from happiness research, partly for their desirability as places to visit. (It’s obvious that Weiner had a longstanding yen to visit Bhutan; one can hardly grudge him this small pleasure, if only to compensate him for the miserable weeks in Moldova).

Most of the book then is structured as a chronological account of the places he visited, and what he learned in each. It’s a standard travel narrative, with little didactic chunks pasted in at various points (usually towards the end of the chapter devoted to a particular destination). During his stay at each location, he generally tries to interview a variety of people to ask about their thoughts on happiness; typically these subjects include one or more “experts”, random “wo(man) on the street” interviews, and any available U.S. expats. This gives him the chance to revisit the academic findings, and to discuss various aspects at greater length as the book progresses. As gimmicks go, it’s not a bad one, and the result is quite readable, without being exceptional.

It suffers from the kinds of minor defects you might expect. Not everyone he meets while engaged in his happiness tourism is interesting, or has anything useful to add, and at times you wish that he’d been a little more selective in his reporting. A more distracting flaw is that Weiner shares a weakness exhibited by many memoirists – he has a compulsive, almost pathological, need to be liked. Not just by the locals in the places he visits, but also by his readers. This leads him, on far too many occasions, to lapse into what I can only describe as a very regrettable cutesiness in his writing, which goes from just slightly annoying to fingernails-on-the-blackboard irritating as the book progresses. Discipline is not a hallmark of his style; for instance, we get sentences like this:

The prize wasn’t much ... but the event marked a major shift, what I might call a paradigm shift if I were the kind of person who used terms like “paradigm shift”.

Don’t they have editors to save writers from themselves (and readers from sentences like the one above)? Evidently not. But there are compensating moments of charm:

Its name, like all Icelandic words, is impossible for foreigners to pronounce lest they risk total and irreversible facial paralysis, so for safety reasons I will not divulge it here.

Overall, Eric Weiner is a genial, if occasionally over-eager, guide. The particular conceit that he adopts in the book, discussing the findings of happiness researchers by placing them in the context of the people and places he visits, works surprisingly well. I thought his chapter on Iceland worked particularly well. Others, such as those on Great Britain and on India, were less successful – somewhat unfocused, and lacking a coherent argument. The book would have benefited from some tighter editing. But these are minor flaws in a pretty decent book.

3.5 stars. Round as you see fit.

Trish says

The subtitle of this book is *One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*, 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.

"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...

Jenny says

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:

"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.

Sarah says

I absolutely loved this book. Not only is Weiner brutally honest (and laugh-out-loud funny because of it), he is a great storyteller but never, ever tells you what to think. There were times that I questioned my own beliefs and wanted to have a bigger conversation. This is a good read for anyone. Highly recommend!

A few words of wisdom gleaned from the pages:

"Maybe happiness is like this: not feeling like you should be elsewhere, doing something else, being someone else. Maybe it is simply easier to 'be' and therefore 'be happy.'"

"No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

"Recording life is a poor substitute for living it."

"Several studies, in fact, have found that trust - more than income or even health - is the biggest factor in determining our happiness."

"All of the moments in my life, everyone I have met, every trip I have taken, every success I have enjoyed, every blunder I have made, every loss I have endured has been just right. I'm not saying they were all good or that they happened for a reason - I don't buy that - but they have been right. They have been... Okay. Okay is not bliss, or even happiness. Okay is not the basis for a new religion or self-help movement. But okay is a start, and for that I am grateful."

"Travel, at its best, transforms us in ways that aren't always apparent until we're back home."

"Social scientists estimate that about 70 percent of our happiness stems from our relationships, both quantity and quality, with friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors. During life's difficult patches, camaraderie blunts our misery; during the good times, it boosts our happiness."

"Benjamin Franklin, America's first self-help author, once wrote that happiness is 'produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen as by little advantages that occur every day.'"

"Anything too big to be swept under the carpet is automatically counted as furniture."

"Don't expect perfection, or even consistency."

"Maybe this is how enlightenment happens. Not with a thunderclap or a bolt of lightning but as a steady drip, drip, drip until one day you realize your bucket is full."

"Only a fool or philosopher would make sweeping generalizations about the nature of happiness. I am no philosopher, so here goes: Money matters, but less than we think and not in the way we think. Family is important. So are friends. Envy is toxic. So is excessive thinking. Beaches are optional. Trust is not. Neither is gratitude."

Zornitsa says

האמת היא שיש הרבה דרכים להשיג את ההצלחה, אבל הדרך הנכונה היא זו שבה אתם מרגישים טוב. זה לא אומר שאתם צריכים להיות מושלמים, אבל אתם צריכים להיות מודעים לעצמכם ולחלומות שלכם. זה אומר שאתם צריכים להיות מודעים לרגשות שלכם ולחלומות שלכם. זה אומר שאתם צריכים להיות מודעים לרגשות שלכם ולחלומות שלכם. זה אומר שאתם צריכים להיות מודעים לרגשות שלכם ולחלומות שלכם.

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????? ?????? says

האמת היא שיש הרבה דרכים להשיג את ההצלחה, אבל הדרך הנכונה היא זו שבה אתם מרגישים טוב. זה לא אומר שאתם צריכים להיות מושלמים, אבל אתם צריכים להיות מודעים לעצמכם ולחלומות שלכם. זה אומר שאתם צריכים להיות מודעים לרגשות שלכם ולחלומות שלכם. זה אומר שאתם צריכים להיות מודעים לרגשות שלכם ולחלומות שלכם. זה אומר שאתם צריכים להיות מודעים לרגשות שלכם ולחלומות שלכם.

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 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 *The Geography of Bliss* 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 J. Maarten Troost, especially *The Sex Lives of Cannibals: Adrift in the Equatorial Pacific*, and enjoyed it, *The Geography of Bliss* will be right up your alley.

Bettie? says

What's the chances of this - three raspberries in a row!

How can the only stop in Holland be Rotterdam to give an analysis that the Netherlands is not where you would find bliss!

Meh.

K.D. Absolutely says

What makes people happy?

This basically is what this book tries to answer. It does not offer solution to unhappiness. As the author Eric Weiner puts it, he only hopes his reader to have something to "chew on". Boy, Weiner offers a lot of stuff that his readers could chew and afterwards either swallow or spit out. They are so many that I did not know which to one to pick, remember or forget.

The reason why they are so many is that Eric Weiner, an American, is a foreign correspondent for National Public Radio and has been assigned to more than 30 countries (What a job!). So, he knows what he talks about. In this book, he goes to the happiest countries in the world, i.e., Switzerland, Iceland, Bhutan, Qatar, Thailand, etc. as well as to the least, Moldova. He also incorporated insights from: India, where happiness and misery live side-by-side; Great Britain, where happiness is in the making and USA (for he has to talk about his own country).

I bought this book thinking that Philippines was included. Most of the Filipinos I know are proud to have our country always rank high in happiest country in the world survey. *Anything* positive about our country in the

world's eyes is something that we are always or should be proud of. After finishing 352 pages of this book, however, the only mention about Filipinos are those *baristas* in Qatar with no indication whether they were happy while grinding coffee or not (at least, nothing negative!). Weiner, however, included Thailand and India whose concepts of happiness, in my opinion, are similar to us Filipinos'. For example, in Thailand, like in the Philippines, we take things lightly. *"We can call our fat officemate a hippo. We may get a slap, curse or a frown. But at the end of the day, we are still friends. Jokes make things light in the office"* says the Thai in Weiner's interview.

So, what makes people happy? Is it money? Does culture have anything to do with it? Does living in a tropical country or a house by a beach make its people happy? Does a well-run government have an effect on its citizenry's happiness? Are religious countries more happy than others?

For me, happiness is a state of mind and it is a confluence of personal emotions. One's happiness can be a factor of his/her personal beliefs brought about by his/her upbringing, religion, education, family, dreams, etc. It is so complex to understand that I tend to agree with the Indian in the book who says that *"the more you think about happiness, the more unhappy you get. Happiness should not be taken seriously"*

Most of my family members and friends here in the Philippines, would probably say that money means happiness. This is what Weiner says about it: ***"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."***

I agree 100% to the above Weiner formula. That's why I drop down my book whenever my wife or daughter talks to me ignoring that I am engrossed with what I am reading. *Family is important*. That's why I take time off just to make friends here in Goodreads. *So are friends*. I don't envy people getting more "likes" in their book reviews *Envy is toxic* ha ha!

That's why I am happy! ~~Well, most of the time.~~

Andy says

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.

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.

It's not a giveaway to say that nowhere does Weiner find utopia. The happiness he does encounter reflects in the book itself: imperfect but charming, and as stimulating for the questions it raises as for those it answers.

Helynne says

I loved American journalist Eric Weiner's dry humor as he describes his recent romp around the world researching different societies and their philosophies on happiness. During his travels to the Netherlands, Switzerland, Bhutan, Qatar (Persian Gulf), Iceland, Moldova, Thailand, India, Great Britain and finally back to the USA, he learns so much about various ethnic groups and what is and is not important to their overall contentment. My favorite chapter happened to be the visit to Iceland where, despite the months of neverending darkness, the people are upbeat and creative, great contributors to their culture in terms of writing and music, and fiercely proud of their language ("the pure speech of the Vikings") and identity. In short, there is a correlation between creativity and happiness. The most downbeat chapter is the discussion of Moldova, a poor country between Romania and the Ukraine, which has virtually no culture, no optimism, and no desire to reach out to make other people's lives better. The one thread that runs through this psychological study is that there is a definite link between altruism and happiness. "The part of the brain linked to altruism is also the part linked to food and sex," Weiner notes. "We're hardwired for altruism, not just faking it (202-203). He also states that "People engaged in the highest altruistic professions--nurses, clergy, physical therapists, and firemen report the greatest happiness (211). While in Qatar, Weiner says that Jean-Paul Sartre was wrong in his famous quote from "No Exit" that "Hell is other people." He says, "Hell isn't other people. Seventy percent of our happiness rests on our relationships with other people" (114). He also notes that materialistic people are not as happy as non-materialistic people. As for us Americans, we have more money today than Americans ever have had, yet we are not as happy. The self-help movement actually makes this worse "by telling us that happiness lives inside of us just when we should be looking outward; not to money, but to other people, to community and to the human bonds that so clearly are the sources of happiness" (310). Lots to be learned here from a cultural and psychological point of view!

Rachel says

I wanted to throw this book in a lake (unfortunately, it's a library book). At times it was funny, sure, and it was kind of interesting. But I couldn't get over its shortcomings and so I didn't finish it (maybe you think that makes me unqualified to form an opinion of it, but I don't). First off, a real gripe I have with these pop science (I use science loosely here, because I couldn't think of another way to describe the genre) books is that they never seem to have a bibliography, or always cite their sources. I mean, the author is no researcher, but still he quotes a whole lot of other works, which it would be nice if he had collected them at the back (and not, dare I say, too hard). In addition, he showed moments of extreme cultural insensitivity. Clearly, the question "are you happy" is not always an appropriate one to ask. Take when he was in Qatar. He even knew

it was an inappropriate question, but asked it anyway.

Weiner is also ridiculously ethnocentric. When he talks about culture, he is referring to the American definition of 'high culture', not the definition that you should be using when doing cross-cultural research. The claim that Qatar has no culture is absurd! There is no place without a culture. Sure, it might not have its own arts, literature, music, etc., but those things are not equivalent to culture. He criticizes, ridicules even, parts of some of the cultures he visits. For instance, he sees the Bhutanese use of phalluses as an apotropaic symbol (they ward off evil spirits) and makes fun of it. This would be uncalled for and really offensive even if it was a uniquely Bhutanese custom. But no, he doesn't seem to realize that the use of the phallus to ward off evil is fairly common, and dates back at least as far as the ancient Romans.

Finally, Weiner expects to know all there is to know about a culture's view of happiness by going for a week or two and talking to a few people. This is completely outrageous and presumptuous. You can't come to such broad conclusions after a week as a tourist. Basically, thanks to my being an anthropology major, I could not take anymore of this. So, I urge you to be suspicious while reading this book. If you can enjoy it, by all means, do. But don't believe that it's necessarily very true.

Jessica says

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 has always been the case for me with analyzing humor, and maybe it's the same with happiness. Probe it, analyze it, and lo and behold: we're not so happy anymore. Or perhaps it's that his conclusions seem pretty obvious to me. In any case, Weiner's jaunty tone isn't witty or interesting enough for me, so....there you have it: I'm a grump when it comes to this book. I expected more enlightenment.

Kristen says

I laughed my way--out loud--through most of this book. It was clever, very funny, and totally enjoyable. It's written by an NPR correspondent who travels the globe searching for the place, or source, of happiness. What makes us happy, and what doesn't make us happy? It was insightful and hilarious, peppered with quotes from philosophers (from Russell to Nietzsche), scholars, and spiritual leaders.

Just read it again for book club and enjoyed it the second time, though I was much more critical reading it with a larger group in mind.

Karen says

I could not finish this book. Weiner takes a tone that grated on my nerves. Yes, the topic of happiness is

fairly high stakes, and instead of treating it with gentleness and respect, he takes a flippant tone. He seems less interested in educating us about the various cultures he studies and more interested in showing off how witty, well traveled, sarcastic and self-deprecating he can be. After reading the intro chapter and the chapter on the Swiss, I felt as though I was stuck at a dinner party with a loud, self-obsessed dinner guest who was ruining my ability to experience the food and interfering with my ability to connect with the other dinner guests.

An interesting premise, but I wish someone would write this book in a direct, clear, snark-free manner.

Cheryl says

Thanks GR for reminding me about this. I don't remember much, but I do remember it was interesting.

ETA 2012 - ironically, I do remember even now some general principles that Bliss discusses that I wish more people understood and implied. Some of the ideas keep coming up in many of the psych books I've been reading since. For example, 'the paradox of choice' principle - we get frustrated if there's more stuff out there than we can use, because of the feeling that we must be missing out on something even better. I should maybe reread this now that I have read so many other related science and popular science books.

ETA 2017 - maybe I shouldn't reread it, because I'd likely get pissed at it, as I did with the author's Genius book.
