

How to Marry a Finnish Girl

65DN finds that a book on expat life in Finland by an American blogger contains moments of hilarity but not really enough of them.

Phil Schwarzmann is an American IT worker based in Helsinki. He is best known for his blog, 'Phil For Thought,' which takes a humorous look at life in Finland from a foreigner perspective. There is a growing trend for publishers to create book spin-offs from successful humorous blogs – so-called 'non-books' – and this is what Helsinki-based Gummerus decided to do last year. Schwarzmann's *How to Marry a Finnish Girl* is the result.

The light-hearted, pricy paperback meanders rather disjointedly through assorted stereotypes about Finnish culture and expat life. It exaggerates for comic effect but its attempts at humour frequently seem strained and hackneyed: Chapter sub-titles include 'Hello, my name's Finland and I'm an alcoholic.' Even in its presentation, the book is something of a cliché. The subtitle, 'Everything you want to know about Finland that Finns won't tell you' is similar to that of many comical books written about foreign cultures, as is his advice 'Don't Let Finns Read This Book!' It also resorts to a lot of cheap laughs, such as a 'joke' about Mannerheim being homosexual.

Schwarzmann claims that Finnish girls are far more beautiful than anything you'll find in the USA, and Finland is, despite his gripes, a fantastic country to live in. Schwarzmann's opus will teach you how to get the Finnish girl and settle down in Suomi. Expatriate readers, at which this book may be aimed, are likely to laugh out loud at a few parts of it. He bluntly articulates many border-line taboos in expatriate and Finnish life which aren't often discussed

in public: He asserts, without any attempt at sugar-coating, that if you want to get on as an expat in Finland you should probably be 'white.' Expat relationships in Finland are an English-speaking man and a Finnish woman and almost never the other way around. There are two kinds of expats – the 'dumb' ones (like him) who come here for love and struggle to find gainful employment and the clever ones (unlike him) who come here for work and only then find the Finnish girl. Also, anyone who does civil, rather than military, service is dismissed by Finns as Communist or gay.

Schwarzmann's description of dating Finnish women – and his comparison to Swedes – is likely to resonate, at least with American and British readers. Gentlemanly behaviour – which would go without saying when dating a British or American girl – is, claims Schwarzmann, incomprehensibly attractive to Finnish girls used to 'country bumpkin' Finnish dates. Finnish girls are superior to Swedes because, though there are more 10s in Sweden, there are also more unattractive girls. Finland, however, contains a very high number of eights. And they are relatively 'low maintenance': 'Finnish girls grew up poor. The majority urinated in an outhouse until they were 11, while their father traded in the bedroom furniture to pay off his gambling debts. Finnish girls appreciate the simple things in life. Instead of buying jewellery, write her a poem. Instead of a fancy dinner, how about a picnic in the park?' Continuing the dating advice, Schwarzmann insists that you, unlike a Finnish man, should pay for everything on a date. The Finnish girl may, therefore, feel she owes you something so, 'Let her pick up the tab after she's slept with you.'

But these few gems aside, the reader has to contend with assorted problems: unoriginal jokes, a rather cocky author who adds random quotes from his blog which he describes as 'comic

gold' that we have permission to re-use as our own . . . However, the main problem with this book is that Schwarzmänn doesn't seem to be clear about who his audience is.

Are his proposed readers American men in their twenties who might be interested in getting a Finnish girl and moving to Finland? He makes constant references to the USA – noting that former Finnish president Tarja Halonen looks like US celebrity Conan O'Brien, that you can't get out of army service by pretending to be gay (you can in the USA apparently), and that Finnish healthcare and 'school' (American for 'university') is 'free' (unlike in the USA). But, then, a lot of the book assumes that the reader lives in Finland. There are throwaway comments that an American reader would be unlikely to understand – such as a reference to Finns loving Finland so much that they tend to abduct their half-foreign children and bring them back to Finland, or to 'classy' Swedish-speakers. Only somebody who had experienced it would find Schwarzmänn's observation that McDonalds servers speak English better than city officials even remotely funny.

So, perhaps it's aimed at English-speaking expats living in Finland? But, if it is, then the superficiality and lack of nuance in most of Schwarzmänn's descriptions is likely to infuriate that audience. Though possibly funny for an outsider, an expat would note that some things Schwarzmänn writes are plain wrong. You most certainly *can* buy kebabs in Finland, purchase alcohol other than from Alko, and learn the 'damn near impossible' language. His book brims with the kind of clunking cliches which may seem true at first but which become less concrete as you stay here longer – *all* Swedish-speakers are rich, *all* Finns speak good English, *all* Finnish men are drunks, and so on. In fact, other than '*vittu*' and basic phrases, there's almost a complete lack of Finnish in this book. Expats tend to codeswitch. They absorb idiosyncratically Finnish concepts and terminology into their everyday English: 'bun'

becomes *'pulla.'* But these kinds of areas of expat appeal, ideal to describe 'the six kinds of Finn,' are completely missing.

Some of the jokes won't even work unless you have a detailed knowledge of Helsinki and perhaps the problem is that Schwarzmänn lives in Helsinki and doesn't seem to have been much outside it. Accordingly, he dismisses every political party in contemptuous terms, except for Kokoomus and the Greens: the ones notably popular in Helsinki. He also gives the impression not only that you can get by in Finland without learning any Finnish – that may be true in Helsinki but not if you want a plumber in Oulu – but that, despite living here for around a decade, he hasn't learnt any Finnish himself. Maybe if he did, he could communicate with more Finns and produce a more subtle, original, amusing book. This book contains some amusing moments but it could have been so much better.

How to Marry a Finnish Girl: Everything You Wanted to Know About Finland, That Finns Won't Tell You. Gummerus. 2011. 167pp. Paperback. €25.90 (at Stockmann).