Andrew Nestingen: When do you wear a hat? When don't you wear a hat? A 3-year-old, a 4-year-old, a 5-year-old, you never see them without a hat in Helsinki. It's as if there is a secret code that all parents seem to understand that everyone should always wear a hat. It's like, you run into these things that trip you up and you think, “What happened?”

Colin Gioia Connors: In 2008, Professor Andrew Nestingen went on sabbatical to Finland with his pregnant wife and two-year-old daughter. It wasn't his first trip to Finland—but it was his first trip as a father. He often felt culture shock as a parent, and each time he took his daughter out to daycare or to playdates, he encountered a culture of parenting in Finland that was completely different to the one he knew in America.

Andrew: Another really good one is sleeping outside. You know, everyone has a baby carriage for infants, or up to, like, 18 months or whatever. And they're really nice baby carriages, they're very well made and comfortable, they're not cheap, and everyone uses them in Helsinki. If you have a baby carriage [and] you go on the bus or use public transportation, [then] it's free if you are pushing the carriage. And so there is this, sort of, inclusive attitude toward children and their equipment and so forth. And so, infants, at home, two hours in the afternoon when they get their afternoon nap, or longer, they push them out on the balcony, even—no matter how cold it is. You're just out there on the balcony—get that fresh air. And evidently, like, in the 1930s, there were these Finnish doctors that did their research and came to the conclusion that it was very important for kids to have fresh air. And so that became—they said it to the midwives and the whole midwife clinic system that is responsible for both prenatal and postnatal care. So parents were getting this message, and it, like, totally permeates the culture. Like, everyone knows: this is what you are supposed to do. And it's not just a preference, it's medical instructions about how to give your child a nap. And so that made me think about the fashion stuff and other things that I observed, that there are these best practices of child rearing that everyone adheres to and aligns with that are about doing it a certain way. And that, to me, was just so different from what I knew about American culture, where there are just so many different attitudes. It was just so striking to me that whatever the practices are, we have, in the United States, so much debate, and a lack of tradition, and trend following. Like, “This is the way to do it.” “No, no, no,” you know, “Swaddle the baby!” “Don't swaddle the baby!” all these different things that are continually shifting. It's not an area that I knew that much about, but I just thought it was really interesting to see the way that culture and institutional practice figure in the way that people live their everyday lives.

[*Intro music starts*]

Colin: Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better
understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I'm your host Colin Gioia Connors.

[*Intro music ends*]

Visiting Lecturer of Danish, Kristian Næsby and I sat down with Professor Andrew Nestingen to discuss Nordic approaches to parenting and schooling. Finnish schools are often considered to be the best in the world, and today their educational policies are the subject of international study and admiration. But a country's educational policies can't be separated from the culture that instituted them. Andy is an expert on Finnish culture. He is also an expert on Scandinavian crime fiction, so a warning to our listeners: our discussion touches on violent crimes against children as part of a larger discussion on Nordic mindsets about children. Kristian Næsby starts us out.

Kristian Næsby: Maybe I can say that all through my childhood I was put outside for afternoon naps, like two hours in the afternoon. Come rain or shine, right? Or frost! You know, you just sleep outside. When you walk around in Scandinavia you see the baby strollers outside. You see them outside of houses, you see them outside of cafes, and mom is inside drinking coffee. And it's just normal. You walk around and you see babies sleeping in strollers all around society. For me, this whole idea of that connects to trust issues and how trust is so much more permeant in Nordic cultures than here. There is the story of Danish woman in New York City, first time in America with her infant, and she did the same thing as she was used to doing in Copenhagen. So she went to a cafe with some of her friends, left the stroller outside the cafe with the little baby in it. And she was arrested! People called the cops on her because… right?

Colin: Woah!

Andrew: Child neglect.

Colin: Child neglect, of course, because that is what an American would think because you're just walking away from your baby—someone is going to snatch it, at the very least!

Kristian: Right! And in our mind that is insane! Like, who would want to steal a baby? They are really annoying. [*laughter*]

Colin: That's a lot of work to take care of a baby—

Kristian: It's a lot of work! Why would you want to do that?

Andy: When you start to think about little details like that, there are just huge gulfs in the way we think about things. And you see the underlying cultural assumptions that are the ways you have been raised to think about certain issues.

Colin: So one of the things I think about with the visibility of children in society is that for Americans, there is a real fear of baby snatchers and of the terrible crimes that humans can do to each other because there have been very awful crimes committed in the past in the States that led to putting missing children milk cartons to find them.

Andrew: Mhm. I was just going to say I know that issue very well because growing up in Minnesota, this boy my age named Jake Wetterling was abducted and disappeared in a rural Minnesota town in like 1983 or 1984 or something like that. I was like ten or twelve years old at the time. So I remember it was covered heavily and [he was just] gone. They didn't solve the crime and so forth and then maybe five or six years ago one of the suspects was finally arrested and they found some sort of remains, he led them to the remains, I think, and then they were able to finally close the case. And this man was tried and found guilty. But like you say—milk cartons—or sensational cases of child abduction and mistreatment and crimes against children and so forth. It really does figure
prominently in American society and often we see it in the tabloids.

**Kristian:** And it is so interesting because the crime statistics in Scandinavia are way, way lower than in the United States. And then you've seen this huge wave of Scandinavian crime fiction with egregious horrifying acts of violence and murders and stuff. And then we have these investigators trying to figure it out in these normally rather peaceful societies. Do you have an idea where that comes from?

**Andrew:** So I've thought a lot about that, and it is one thing that I am always surprised by. It's hard to find a Scandinavian crime novel in which children aren't present and oftentimes involved in the crimes as victims or sometimes as perpetrators. And I really started to notice it five or six years ago when I was talking to a woman I knew who was a crime writer and was at the early part of her career and had gotten in with an agent and had these manuscripts she was trying to get published with this agent. And she said the agent had read one of the manuscripts and said, “You know, there is a death of a child in the beginning of the manuscript. You can just forget getting that published because no American publisher is going to be interested in that.”

**Kristian:** Oh, so that was over here? That was in America?

**Andrew:** That's right. Yeah. And I can just think of like three or four [*laughs*] Nordic novels especially a couple of Icelandic ones that begin with—there is one by Yrsa Sigurðardóttir that begins with these twins being taken out to some fjell and they dig them a grave and put them in some cellar and then they um...[*trails off*] It is hard to imagine a worse story, right? Children interred and left. That is like the ultimate, sort of, horrifying notion for a child to be separated from their parent or for a parent to be separated from their child and to know that that kind of thing happened. To begin a crime novel with something like that? It's sort of perverse. And yet it is everywhere so I have tried to think about it and understand it more, like, where does that come from? Where on the one hand you have this rich culture of child-rearing, and on the other hand you have these ideas in these novels and films that are very prominent about the abuse and harm of children.

**Colin:** Yeah, it's a big question of why does Scandinavia have less crime? Because there are a lot of factors that go into that, and I think certainly—you mentioned—the welfare state is one of those things, that if you are offering social services, then you are able to treat people with mental health problems and make sure that they have access to help, and this is just making me think about a recent approach in Iceland to dealing with alcoholism and drug abuse in teens. Because this used to be a huge problem. In the ’90s they did a survey and found that 40% of teens were abusing alcohol regularly and 20% were smoking everyday, and so it was this huge national health crisis: “What are we going to do about this?” And they tried a lot of different things. They started just by putting in more afterschool programs, so: “Let’s get kids playing soccer after school, let’s offer free parenting classes to parents to tell them it’s not just enough to—you need to have quality time, but you need to have a *quantity* of quality time. You need to keep your children home and spend time with them regularly.” They started up rehab centers where very importantly they didn't say, “Come in and learn that drugs are bad.” It was, “Come in and—what do you want to learn? Tell us any skill you want to learn—we will teach it to you.” And so then rehab, you know, you have a program that is supposed to be three months, and you have children that stay in it for five years because they are having fun and they are getting something useful out of it and they are building life skills. But then they also took the approach of setting a curfew for teenagers so it wasn't legal for children to be on the street after 10 p.m. at night. And this has had great success in Iceland. They have gone from being one of the highest teen alcohol abuse rates in the late ’90s to now being one of the lowest in Europe. And so other European countries have tried adopting this, but not everyone has adopted the children curfew. [*laughs*] This would be unthinkable in some other Scandinavian countries.

**Andrew:** I mean, one of the things that it raises in another category of things that are really important in making those kinds of cultural distinctions is *autonomy*. Kids just have a ton of autonomy. In a way, your example, what's happening there is that instead of
parents fostering their children, telling them how to handle alcohol or whatever, the state is taking a role in the child-rearing—curfews, right? The parents aren't doing it—the state's gonna do it. "They're not being entertained on the weekends or they are not entertained at night? Okay, we're gonna come in with programs that give them the opportunity to do these things." So you could argue that it is really the mediation of the state in daily life that plays the key role there—not the family. I think that is a pretty convincing argument. There are a lot of services that do that kind of thing, and I think one of the outcomes of it is that kids have a lot more autonomy and a lot more responsibility from an early age and think of themselves as quasi adults, and as adults as early teens. A good example: any major metropolis in Scandinavia, if you can call them metropolises, is— Well, you just look around. I mean, there are, like, ten-year-olds on the subway or the bus or eight-year-olds or whatever, and it's like, no-one would bat an eye. You know, that is just the way that you get around and they can do it, too. And that is not only a general set of assumptions about security for young people, but also about their autonomy. They can do those things, they are ready to do those things, and so forth.

Colin: Like what you hear? Be sure to subscribe to Crossing North wherever you get your podcasts. Crossing North is sponsored by the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, and we need your help to grow our podcast. Consider donating to one of the many funds that help support the department's mission to “discover, preserve, and transmit fundamental knowledge about the languages, literature, history, politics, and cultures of the” Scandinavian, Nordic, and Baltic countries. A gift to the Friends of Scandinavian Languages and Literature fund will be especially helpful to production of Crossing North. Go to scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more. Once again, that's scandinavian.washington.edu.

Kristian: This reminds me of something that I teach in my class, which we talked about a few weeks ago in the Introduction to Scandinavia class. This idea of the Nordic states, the welfare state, trying to kind of set the standard for good child upbringing, and having these ideas, not necessarily through like a curfew or laws, but trying to make it easier to make good choices than to make bad choices. And it reminds me of the Nordic forest kindergartens, for example, where there are no fences around the kindergarten and they are usually placed in forests. And what you try to teach the kids from, like, two and a half to seven years old is that they have a whole lot of freedom, but with that freedom comes responsibilities— that you know where you are allowed to go to, you know that you are not allowed to go to the pond without an adult. Like, an interesting thing is that they are not even called “teachers.” The idea is not teaching. The idea is like child development and the are called “pedagogues.” They are trained in child development and not necessarily, like, “Okay, here is the alphabet.” So they are teaching the kids motor skills, how to use tools... The children learn to use knives from, like, the age of three—not as a weapon but as a tool. And I think that you can see that kind of culture, and that kind of philosophy of early childhood education where you're not prepping them for school necessarily, what you are trying to teach them are like life skills. And then when you are six in most of the Scandinavian countries, there is like a year where you transition from free learning, learning through play, into a more school setting, usually called kindergarten class that you are in from your year six to your year seven, where you learn some of those skills that you have in preschool. Right? It's even called pre-school. It's not in Scandinavia.

Andrew: One interesting comparison again, coming back to this kind of U.S. point of comparison is that early childhood, preschool, both at the policy level, and I think for many parents' way of thinking about it, the concern is with getting into the race. [*laughs*] You know, get ’em reading! Get ’em learning numbers! Baby Einstein! You know, whatever it is, they need to be gotten ready for school because soon they are going to need to learn how to read and so forth. So childhood isn't that space of creativity and learning, and if it is about learning, it's about instrumental learning. You need to acquire this knowledge to get to the next place in order to get to the next place in order to get to the next place. Even, I feel like just my own reflections about my own kids. You know, when I was in kindergarten, it was kind of like warehousing, I think we took a nap, you know. It was basically just socialization into the school. And now it's like the kids are learning to read, it's an academic track already, and this is the Seattle Public Schools.

Colin: If I can offer a speculation, it sounds like the two different styles of education reflect economic anxieties, that in the United States, just, the anxiety of I need to do the best I can in school so that I can get a good-paying job. Otherwise I will end up with a low-
paying job and have a miserable life. Is there not the same anxiety in Scandinavia?

Kristian: There seems to be a higher sense of security, and security net, under the students in Scandinavia because you definitely see it here. The importance of getting into that good school, oh having those good grades, and you see it in the students that we teach here at the university, that they are so well-trained in getting good grades and they are very, very good at going to school, listening and taking notes, and going to exams. They are very well-trained. I didn't get my first—the first grade I ever got was when I was fifteen. That does not happen to American students. And I think that the focus on grades in the Nordic countries are also there, but the stakes are low.

Andrew: Why do you think the stakes are lower?

Kristian: I think one of the main reasons, for example in high school or gymnasium as they are called in Scandinavia. There is no standardized test to get into universities. There are universities, or different topics that you want to study where you need to have a certain grade average to get into those, and that's very competitive, but you can always get into the good universities and study some of the other things because universities are free. And all the universities in Scandinavia are good universities. We don't have the world-class universities of America, but they're pretty close. Mostly the universities of the Nordic countries are in the top fifty university list that comes out every year. But you can always get in. You can take, all the way through PhDs for free. Right? You even get stipends from the government to do it. So there is not the same pressure. Maybe if you want to get into one specific education, but you can still do it.

Andrew: One thing that I always think about that question is that there is just such an array of credentializing. Like, you can get a degree in many different areas, technical education as well, and then, with really high rates of union membership, you know, in the '90s. So if you have those credentials and you are a union member, you can be assured that you will make a living wage and with the support of the state system you don't have to worry about health care, you don't have to worry about retirement, you don't have to worry about [the] cost of education for your children if you have them. There are a lot of different ways in which you get to a good place, you can have a reasonable salary and you can be assured. And a lot of the anxieties—what if I'm in a car accident and the other driver is poorly insured, and these things happen. You know, you don't have those kinds of concerns because there is a system that protects you from contingencies that might ruin you, so to speak. You know, in the United States you can earn gazillions of dollars, and you can earn basically nothing. And if you earn nothing you are on the street nowadays. And I think that sort of huge disparity between the top and the bottom, you just don't have that there [in Scandinavia] to the same degree.

Kristian: Yeah, the extremes are so much bigger here. And I think I have a good example of this: in the Scand 100 class that I taught this fall, I had the 130 students meet about 75 high school students from Denmark and we were discussing these cultural differences. And one of the things I have them do is, they have to make a "Top 3" what do you have to achieve or have in your life to, as a stereotypical American or a stereotypical Dane, see yourself as a success in life? And every single one of the Americans had "money" on that Top 3. And only about 1 in 3 of the Danes had "money" on that list. And that is interesting to discuss, right? That difference. But it's not surprising because it is so important for your sense of security in society to get that higher paying job, to move up the ladder, to have money so that your kids can go to school. So that if your mom gets cancer, you have money to treat that in the family, and many of those fears don't exist in the minds of the young Danes.

Colin: Yeah, you have to have enough money to start a family

Kristian: Yeah.

Colin: ...in the United States.
Kristian: Yeah, that's a good point, right? Because you know as a young Dane that if you get a kid, you get one year of maternity leave.

Colin: ...whereas in the United States you might not get one day.

Kristian: Yeah.

Andrew: You know, it's funny. I was just thinking of this example from a film that is a little bit outside of our frame of reference, a film, I think, is it called *Jericho* maybe? I can't remember, I think that's the wrong title. But in any event, she says to this drifter in the film, “You can't have love without money.” And [it is] just like such a great line. You know, when you think of a late capitalist system. And that's why the money matters in a sense. The things that you really care about, love, people you care about, time, being able to care for others—you need money to do it! And that is just the reality in American society, and I think it is a different reality in those Nordic societies just because of the system that they built. It's changing, many people care about money just as much, there are rich people there, too, but I think that for the median citizen there is a kind of security and a sense that I can do the things in life that matter to me, my life projects, without it all depending on how much money I have.

Kristian: One of the points that is often made in, like, political discussion about Nordic countries is that, “Oh, look at those socialist societies.” And I don't think that is true. The Nordic societies are definitely capitalist societies, but there is a different underlying value system under most of the things. For example, family is valued. Like, most of Scandinavia shuts down for three weeks during the summer because almost everybody has like five or six weeks vacation from their jobs. And they have it at the same time, both mom and dad, so that they can go vacation with their children. And there are multiple policies like this put in place to try and prioritize family because, you know, people who are happy in life make better workers.

Andrew: Yeah, I mean that's the—what Kristian just said—is like the dirty secret in a sense of the welfare system is that it is an economic model, as well. People need to be happy to work. We need to construct a system that maximizes productivity for these small populations, enhances reproduction so that we have enough workers for the future, and so forth. So there is a kind of an economic, sort of, centralized, planning mechanism there, that has been maintained for almost a century that is about economic productivity. So I think that a lot of times, when we think of the welfare state, especially in the United States, it's like a moral argument, that this is the right way to do it, or this is the humane way to do it. And that is a good argument—I don't mean to take away from it. But I think that the way things operate, they are not socialist systems. They are very strong, integration into the global economy, and [*sighs*] as anywhere else, the big banks, the big corporations have enormous influence on decision making and policy, and it would be a mistake to think otherwise. It is an error to think of them as socialist. They're not. They're full market economies in every way. But as Kristian says, the state's mediation of everyday life is very different there and I think our conversation shows the way in which it shows up in everyday life from children to decision about universities and so forth.

Kristian: And you've studied Finnish school systems. And they're regarded as, if not the best then one of the best in the world. Is that not through competition or how or what makes the Finnish school system so good?

Andrew: Well, I mean competition is certainly a part of it. The Finns—like their sports—they're [a] super competitive people and society in their way, no doubt about it. But I think the school system is one in which—you know, one of the main arguments about the quality of the schools is that they have emphasized the excellence in teacher training and set a high standard for admission to teachers' training programs, masters of education programs. What happens then, is there is a sense of that kind of credentialing where you become a credentialed professional who is an expert in pedagogy for young people, and as a result, there is a lot of autonomy, that is the kind of corollary to the argument. Teachers have a lot of discretion in how they teach their classes. They don't have to follow a specific curriculum that is dictated by the school district. They don't have to—you know, there's not the standardized
testing on an annual or even semi-annual basis that we have now in the United States, thanks to No Child Left Behind of George W. Bush.

Kristian: What about funding?

Andrew: Highly funded schools, both through state-appropriations and the way that the municipal system works. So that, for example, it is not dependent on property taxes, the way it is in the United States, where you can have areas of great wealth and areas of relative poverty, and then as a result huge differences in the availability of resources to support schools. Or, for example, a PTA—it's an unheard of notion that the parents would be paying to operate this association that would support teachers because they are under-funded and can't afford supplies for their classes. [*laughs*] It's like trying to write an email with a typewriter, you know, it just doesn't make sense. They are just such different systems. This, sort of, help-yourself mentality of American society that comes in many ways from a lack of support in various areas, and I think that the funding picture is a big part of that. The correlation between under-funded schools and race in the United States is just a national disgrace. I mean, there is no other way to put it. It is history, obviously going back to Jim Crow and slavery and racism and racist policies in the northern part of the United States [too] I'm not just pointing my finger at the South. But it makes you think that, in the United States, as much as there is this emphasis on producing winners, there is also a hell of a lot of effort on producing losers. The withholding of resources from parts of the society produces people without opportunities for success.

Kristian: Yeah, I think those are very good points and I just talked to my students about this, like how studying different cultures gives you a new set of lenses to look at your own society with. And one of the things we've discussed is: the British prime minister, a few years ago, five or six years ago, in a public speech said, “If you want the American Dream, go to Finland,” because in Finland the upward social mobility is so much higher than it is in the United States. If you are born in the lowest class in America, your risk of staying there is twice as big as if you were born in the lowest class in Finland. And that is very much through the welfare state. This idea of the welfare state trying to make the individual free of the bonds of the family, of where they are born, and trying to level the playing field for every single child.

Andrew: It's interesting, I just heard a summary report of a much bigger study of American society around this question of social mobility. It varies from city to city, where in some cities there is relative opportunity to rise, like 14% of people born in the lowest quartile of that particular city make it up to the second-highest or highest quartile. But then what was especially interesting about this report was that then that varies quite a bit by zip code within cities, so that even looking at a pretty fine-grain measure of a city, it is about blocks. And that is of course the history of segregation in American cities and the history of schools and so forth. But it really tells you how the mosaic of American society in its modes of exclusion and inclusion and paths up and paths that are blacked forever. I think that is just not the way it works there [in Scandinavia] to the same degree. Of course there are rich people with advantages there and poor people who don't have as many advantages and [there are] correlations with various social harms and so forth, but—just as an anecdote—[*laughs*] I remember when I was trying to get our daughter into preschool, it was, like, assignment by where you live, and then you apply, and you are supposed to go to the one closest to where you live, the closest one that is open where you can get a slot. And so then I was asking these people I knew, my friends, “Oh is this a good one? Is that a good one? What do you think?” You know, that is the conversation of parents in the United States. But they were like, “Oh, they are all the same. Don't worry about it.” It didn't make sense to them that you would be trying to work the angles to find the good one because there is a sense of universality, like Kristian was saying. Equity of resource distribution is a very important principle, like that notion of fairness. So, Yeah, it's just like the history of the United States is full of brutality, and the genocide of Native peoples and, you know, slavery—it's like a horror show and that's with us today, and I think we do a disservice to our national history to not emphasize the importance of those aspects of American history in our current day and the way it continues to create different opportunities, and you just have to fight every day to make a positive difference and I hope that learning some things from the Nordic countries might help us do that.
Colin: Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today's episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today's music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson. Links to his music can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website. Visit scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more about the podcast and other exciting projects hosted by the Scandinavian Studies Department. If you are a current or prospective student, consider taking a class or declaring a major. Professor Andrew Nestingen teaches a course called “The Child and the School in Scandinavia,” as well as courses on crime fiction and cinema. You can find complete course listings for the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at scandinavian.washington.edu. Once again, that's scandinavian.washington.edu.

SHOW NOTES

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