

42 ||| books

A DEBUT NOVEL SET ON THE NAZI HOME FRONT JUSTIFIES ALL THE HYPE

ALLAN MASSIE

Audrey Magee is an experienced Irish journalist, and *The Undertaking* is her first novel. It comes garlanded with praise from other Irish writers, Colm Toibin, Fergal Keane and Hugo Hamilton, and indeed Magee thanks the first two in her acknowledgements for their help "at pivotal moments". This makes the puffs they have given look like back-scratching, but I don't think it is. This novel of the 1939-45 war seen from the German side is ambitious, assured and successful.

It begins with what may seem an improbability, but is factually accurate. Peter Feder, serving in the infantry on the Eastern Front, has arranged to be married, finding his bride through a marriage bureau. This will grant him leave; as for the girl, Katharina, she can at least be sure of a widow's pension. He comes back to Berlin and, though her par-



THE UNDERTAKING
AUDREY MAGEE
Atlantic, 304pp,
£12.99

The question is: can Peter survive, kept going by his vision of wife and child, and, if so, in what shape?

Well-done as the war sequences are, much of this will inevitably be familiar to many readers. It is Katharina's story, on the home front in Berlin which is less familiar, may even be read as original. Thanks to her father's connections, she enjoys privilege. There are parties and she is able to dress well. At first she shares in the general confidence, which long survives the experience of air-raids. She dotes on her son. But she comes to realize that her security is precarious. Her brother, Johannes, suffers shell shock, but, after a brief convalescence, is sent back to the front. Dr Weinart will do nothing to help; her father feebly acquiesces. Even the privileged know that there is only so far that they can go.

Later her disillusionment deepens. Pain and grief intrude. She is intelli-

Magee's novel is ambitious, assured and successful

ents disapprove – she could do better for herself, and her mother is disgusted to find that the bridegroom stinks and his hair is full of lice – the marriage takes place, come to love each other, and a child is conceived.

Their backgrounds are different. Peter's father is a schoolteacher who dislikes and distrusts the Nazis. Katharina's father, Gunther Spinell, is a fervent believer in the Führer, and has a friend in high places, Dr Weinart, who arranges for the Spinells to move from their shabby apartment to one confiscated from rich Jews.

Peter goes back to war, by now convinced of Germany's mission in the East. Victory will make for a better future for his family, and especially for his infant son. His hope survives his early experiences – the Russians are bound to be defeated, Germany is invincible, as Dr Weinart has assured him. But his unit is caught up in the terrible Battle of Stalingrad. This is vividly described; Magee has talked with German veterans of the Eastern Front as well as reading extensively. The horrors of what Peter experiences, and his realization that the army there has been abandoned by the regime – are made all too repulsively credible. Much of the narrative is carried forward in snatches of one sentence dialogue.

gent enough to realize that the war is being lost, even while her foolish father remains in denial. She will still be in Berlin when the Russians arrive. The first consequences don't need to be spelled out. But Katharina is an admirable character in most ways, and a survivor. So perhaps is Peter but will he be able to accommodate himself to the reality of the post-war Berlin?

In his recommendation, Hugo Hamilton praises Magee's "understanding of the force of history as it impacts on the lives of ordinary German people during the Second World War". This is something that for years most of us cared little or nothing about, our view being that they had asked for it and deserved whatever they got. More recently we have learned to accept that they were Hitler's victims too, even if many, like Katharina's father and to some extent Katharina herself, were also his willing accomplices. Hans Fallada's *Alone in Berlin*, was one novel which opened our eyes to the realities of the lives of such ordinary people in Nazi Germany. He wrote, of course, from personal experience; Magee has had to use her imagination. I started the novel with misgivings. I finished it thinking that the praise which Toibin, Keane and Hamilton accorded it is fully justified.

Is Scandinavia really the liberal paradise so many of us imagine it to be?

Douglas Osler finds out

Is Denmark really the world's happiest country? Is Norway its richest? Is the *Guardian* right about Sweden being its most successful? Certainly the Scandinavian countries seem to top most of the indices that the rest of the world aspires to – but does it really feel like that if you live there? Aren't there any snakes in the Scandi paradise?

That's what Michael Booth, an Englishman who lives in Denmark with his Danish wife and children, sets out find in this light-hearted, anecdote-heavy book which, rather oddly, tacks on Iceland and Finland too. He wants to examine the apparent Nordic miracle and test its genuineness. He admits that "when faced with the happiest, most trusting and successful people on the planet, one's natural instinct is to try to find fault".

Each country has had a difficult past – which has, he believes, led them to become nervous about external relationships. In Sweden's case he believes there is a residual guilt for their neutrality during the Nazi invasions of their neighbours and for their ambivalence towards the Soviet Union when Finland was threatened.

There are significant contradictions to be resolved. Denmark, "this dark, wet, dull, flat, little country" manages to combine topping the happiest nation chart

“Norway has bought 1% of the world's listed companies,”

with the lowest average lifespan of all five countries and the poorest health record. It has an attractive approach to the balance between work and life with the fewest working hours in the European Union. This may be due in part to the significant gender equality with research showing that inequality breeds stress.

The conundrum of why Denmark



THE MOST NEARLY PERFECT PEOPLE

MICHAEL BOOTH
Jonathan Cape,
356pp, £14.99

is seen to be a desirable place to live continues with noting that it has an extensive welfare state but dental and optical treatment and prescriptions have charges. Danes have the highest taxation in the world, yet more of them are home-owners than anywhere else in Europe.

Norway is, says Booth, the most inward-looking of all five countries but is the most at ease with itself and the world's richest country. As part of its management of its oil wealth – "a paragon of responsible fiscal stewardship" – it has bought one per cent of the world's listed companies. Although it has the world's most expensive beer, Norway is the most gender equal and politically stable country in the world, and often mediates in international conflicts. In other Nordic countries, the seriousness of the Norwegians and their prosperity has made them the target for jokes. Their revenge is a 262 per cent tax on Danish cheese.

The country that gives Booth most problems is Sweden, and he remains at a loss to explain its success. This is also the weakest part of the book, with Booth resorting to trying to provoke the Swedes "with behaviour entirely antithetical to theirs" to see if they betray their reputation for stoicism. His antics are treated with appropriate disdain.