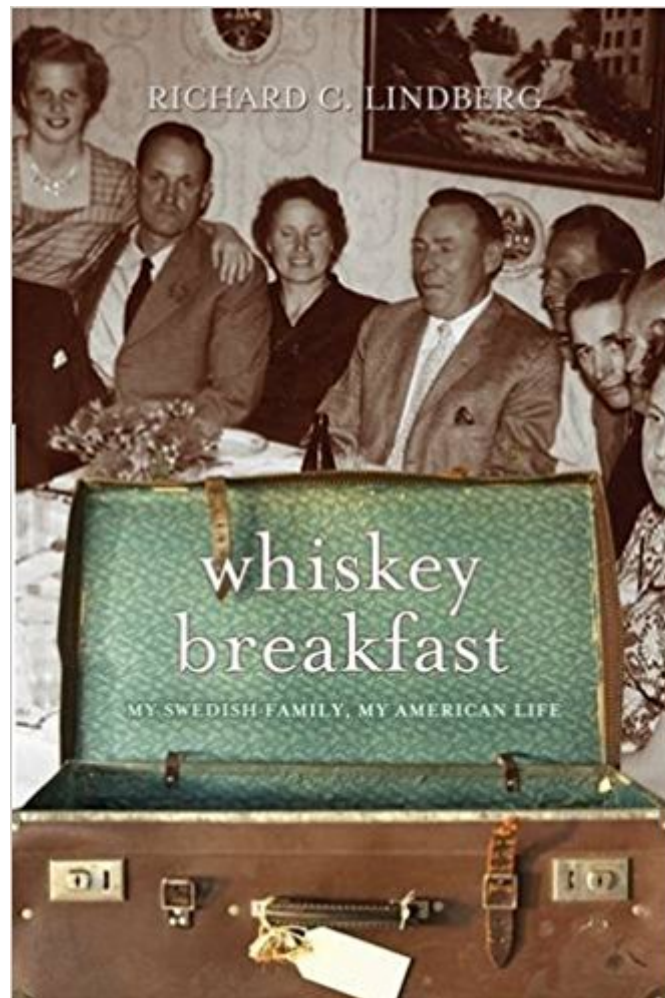




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# Whiskey Breakfast: My Swedish Family, My American Life



## Synopsis

Chicago in the 1920s: Clark Street was the city's last Swedetown, a narrow corridor of weather-beaten storefronts, coal yards, and taverns running along the north side of the city and the locus of Swedish community life in Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century. It represented a way station for a generation of working-class immigrants escaping the hardships of the old country for the promise of a brighter new day in a halfway house of sorts, perched between the old and new lands. For Richard C. Lindberg, whose Swedish immigrant parents and grandparents settled there, it was also the staging ground for an intensely personal, multigenerational, coming-of-age drama based on the struggles of two disparate families—their dreams and their depravities, their victories and their failures. *Whiskey Breakfast* is Lindberg's captivating tale of life as a first-generation baby-boomer Swedish American, caught between the customs of a land he had never been to and the desire to conform and fit into a troubled existence, tragically scarred by alcoholism, divorce, and peer abuse. But it is also a powerful and intimate portrait of his immigrant ancestors, and especially of his father, Oscar—a contractor and master builder who helped develop Chicago's post-World War II suburbs. A paradoxical man, known to some as a socialist, an anarchist, and a serious drinker, Oscar would carry with him to the grave a sixty-two-year-old family secret, a secret that for Lindberg lies at the very heart of the great Swedish unrest that drove his father and countless other men and women out of Sweden and onward to America. Masterfully blending autobiography with immigrant history, *Whiskey Breakfast* surrounds Lindberg's family story with Swedish cultural history and politics, as well as remarkable Chicago history and how Clark Street and Swedetown became, and in many ways remain, a center of Swedish immigrants' social and cultural life. Far from a eulogy for an idealized past, Lindberg has crafted a moving and sobering memoir of a young man's struggle to come to terms with his father and himself, his immigrant heritage, and his native home.

## Book Information

Paperback: 328 pages

Publisher: Univ Of Minnesota Press (August 25, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0816646848

ISBN-13: 978-0816646845

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,541,388 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #97 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Scandinavian](#) #14777 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States](#) #32426 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > State & Local](#)

## Customer Reviews

"Richard Lindberg does not spare himself or his ancestors in this poignant and powerful memoir of his family's entry to the United States. I was reminded of the great cycle of emigrant novels by Vilhelm Moberg, the noted Swedish novelist I first read and so admired in my youth, who wrote vividly and sometimes brutally of the downtrodden classes of his forebears. Lindberg evokes the same haunted landscape of poverty and superstition from which his ancestors fled to America . . . only to suffer different demons in that new land. In the end his story is a redemptive one of endurance and survival." —Harry Mark Petrakis

"Deep, introspective and somber, this is by far Lindberg's most personal book to date." —Kirkus Reviews

A lifelong Chicagoan, Richard C. Lindberg has written fifteen books dealing with city history, politics, criminal justice, sports, and ethnicity. A past president of the Society of Midland Authors and the Illinois Academy of Criminology, he has appeared on the History Channel, Biography, the Travel Channel, A&E, and the Discovery Channel.

WHISKEY BREAKFAST is a very personal book -- a documentation of one man's journey through time to find his destiny. The wellspring of the river of pain that author Lindberg bravely navigates is located in Sweden. Like thousands of other disenchanted Europeans motivated by the excitement and possibility of a wonderful new life, his grandfather Lindberg crossed the ocean in the early 1880's. He became a cowboy in the Dakota Territory of the American West. He was a tough, hard-drinking, difficult man -- self-centered and self-preserved -- he lived in the moment, a inveterate gambler willing change his life on the flip a coin or turn of a card. He took a Swedish wife, fathered the first of his eleven children, and ultimately cooked-up a plan to return to Sweden with his mother-in-law and her dying husband, a frugal trapper who had converted his life's work into a trunk full of gold coins. And so the author's grandfather Charles returns home in triumph -- with a fortune in gold, he starts a new life in Sweden. This is the stuff of fairy tales. But sadly, the inner-workings of

grandfather Charles' mind continue to click and turn until the "clock strikes twelve" and the Lindberg family dream evaporates on a "busted flush." He gambles away all his wealth. Then the story of the Lindberg clan continues at the turn of Twentieth century in Old World Sweden -- a place over-run with poverty, despair, and disease. A place occupied by a bi-polar population of heavy drinking, free loving, peacenik, radicals on one side; and hard-working, penny pinching, pious, tee totaling, bible-thumping temperance zealots on the other. One hundred years later, the grandson Richard Lindberg, now a successful writer living on the far Northwest side of Chicago, licks his emotional wounds. In between, the mostly painful, but always illuminating "Dickensian" tale of his family remained untold until Lindberg decided to unload it in the pages of this book. His Swedish relatives struggle in pain and in place in the early 1900's. Life is a hardscrabble battle. People scrape out a living. Children are flushed into this world and soon become little workingmen. Families tolerate a life of pain and along the way a Swedish mentality evolves -- a very different version of today's "just do it" boomer-banter to which is added, "forget it". And if you can't forget it -- just drink. These Swedes drift in this an aquavit river of denial -- the alcoholic water of life. Some escape to America. In the new country, Lindberg's family of immigrants brings their Old World survival tools to Chicago. The author, the unwanted offspring of a 40-year-old fearful "depression-child" mother and a fearless 56-year-old father (a successful businessman, an unstoppable philanderer, and a total father failure) becomes a baby-boomer, first-generation American. Amidst the phony "Father Knows Best" milieu of mid-Fifties America, he is an isolated loner forever brokering the irrational demands of his dysfunctional parents, and striving to understand the world through the murky mist of his Swedish heritage. An early victim of the "bullying" phenomena, he struggles through his youth carrying a "badge of shame and loneliness" stamped out of his parents divorce, his embarrassing family, and his own sensitive and defensive nature evolved from a broken childhood. WHISKEY BREAKFAST is painfully entertaining -- a carefully crafted tome that exposes the "melting pot" myth of this country. America has been and continues to be a fanciful foreign port of dreams for immigrants who arrive and live in a fantasy world of media myths and programmed conventional "American" behavior. But these immigrants always retain the comforting flames of Old World methods and memories creating an unresolved dialectic. The book also squarely addresses the general plight of the children of dysfunctional parents -- bailing frantically to keep their little boats of life afloat in the angry parental waters of discontent and denial.

Having read excerpts of "Whiskey Breakfast" which were available online, I eagerly awaited the publication of the full length book which was finally released by the University of Minnesota Press a

few weeks ago. I was not disappointed when the autobiographical title arrived yesterday. I found "Whiskey Breakfast" so engrossing that I read it in its entirety in a single day. In recounting the history of his Swedish immigrant ancestors, Richard C. Lindberg has rummaged through the attic and recreated a vivid picture of his various and sundry family members. This was no simple task since many of his closest relatives kept their personal secrets closely guarded and they frequently denied their own past lives as they transplanted themselves from rural Sweden and established themselves in urban America. For example, Lindberg's immigrant father, Oscar W. Lindberg, who fled to North America under an assumed name to avoid military conscription in 1924, was an opinionated and bigoted leftist radical who saw no contradiction in espousing extreme political views while simultaneously prospering as a successful capitalist. Lindberg was a carpenter who became a building contractor and specialized in high quality suburban tract houses. With four marriages, two of which resulted in divorces, and numerous mistresses, O. W. Lindberg also proved to be a selfish and largely negligent parent with a large bank account and a fiery temper. Reading the family saga described in this book is unsparingly painful at times. Lives are ruined by alcoholism, marital discord and constant cigarette smoking. Quiet despair and the daily trials of eking out a subsistence level standard of living one step removed from abject poverty were common experiences for the author and his maternal relatives. While his divorced mother and widowed grandmother struggled to keep groceries on the table and to pay the monthly mortgage, their neighbors seemed to be enjoying comfortable middle class prosperity. Across the street, in an unheated bedroom in the enclosed back porch, Lindberg worried about the realistic possibility of being sent to live in an orphanage if his largely absent father failed to send alimony and child support payments regularly. By way of full disclosure, I must admit to being somewhat biased inasmuch as I am acquainted with the author and have had numerous opportunities to speak with him regarding his previously published works on such topics as local Chicago history, politics, sports and true crime. I can safely state that "Whiskey Breakfast," which is as much a personal memoir as it is an immigrant history story, is quite unlike anything else that Richard C. Lindberg has ever written to date. Ultimately, "Whiskey Breakfast" is a story of enduring hardships and persevering despite being repeatedly beaten down, criticized and scarred by the forces of cruel fate, merciless peers, parental neglect and societal indifference. It is about learning from the past, coming to terms with harsh and unjust ordeals and trying to face the future with a measure of confidence and optimism. As Churchill, who endured an austere childhood of his own, famously observed, "Solitary trees, if they grow at all, grow strong."

This book is so well chronicled to tell the history of this most interesting family and how the past

influenced the future. The characters are so well depicted I felt I had actually known them. It also gives an interesting picture Sweden in years past and of many Chicago neighborhoods as they were in earlier years. Fascinating read.

I like this book because I enjoy the background of the immigrants that settled in Chicago. I have lived in Chicago my whole life and go through some of the neighborhoods and pass places that still exist that he mentioned in the book. The information is interesting, there is an assortment of characters, the observation of the various time periods that effected the growth of our society that have created the American culture. It could been written as a novel. As an historian, he has included personal and familial experiences as well as historical material. However, his writing style is somewhat pedantic and plodding. This could limit reader interest.

Fascinating, tragic, but really well-written.

A must-read for anyone of Swedish background. I sent copies to my relatives. It was so interesting. They agreed with me.

Good read. The author experienced an unusal and painful childhood. But this book provides a insight into a family history that produced such difficult and dysfunctional adults.

Nothing like I expected. Rather drawn out and depressing. The descriptions sounded wonderful and the type of book I always enjoy but this was a huge disappointment. I cannot recommend

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