

## A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL NORDSKOG AND AARON HAUTALA

### What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

*Michael:* I gained a strong interest in saunas as an ethnographic subject when I rehabilitated the lakeside bathhouse at our family cabin in northern Minnesota. Given the abundance of handsome and unique saunas in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Ontario, a book of this scope seemed to be a worthwhile endeavor to preserve traditions for future generations.

*Aaron:* Growing up in the northwoods of Minnesota and taking a sauna every Saturday night from birth to the day I left for college.

### What research did you undertake in writing *The Opposite of Cold*?

*Michael:* The core of my research involved reading pretty much every book written about saunas. I also spent a lot of time in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society and the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. But the best experience by far was visiting the sites of significant saunas and interviewing the folks who owned them, while Aaron took his stunning photographs.

*Aaron:* Michael did the heavy lifting for the story of

the book, while I researched architectural photography and also the new technology of HDR photography.

### How long did it take you to write the book?

*Michael:* The project took about five years from inception to publication.

*Aaron:* 2+ years of photography, every other weekend, traveling from Finland to Canada, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

### What interesting challenges did you encounter in working on the book?

*Michael:* I was dead set against compiling a categorical depiction of Finnish saunas as a distinct architectural type, because that would have read like a glossary. Yet I wanted to include every possible detail—from which wood burns the hottest to why Finns settled where they did—throughout the narrative. So I spent a lot of time plotting the best place to include each idea.

*Aaron:* Photographic challenges were around every bend. How do you make a small outbuilding look interesting and unique when capturing around 100 of them?

### What do you hope your readers take away from reading *The Opposite of Cold*?

*Michael:* I hope that readers who are familiar with saunas as a family tradition can look at this book and gain a renewed sense of pride in the practice, and those who see it as something a bit odd or exotic will be inspired to give it a try.

*Aaron:* The beauty, the passion, and the story behind sauna. It's not just a hot box; it's a family memory and a treasure. This book is the best gift I could ever give back to my parents as a thank you for the way I was raised.

### How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer or photographer?

*Michael:* I have wanted to be a writer for as long as I remember, but I really began to realize that I could write well after I finished law school in my thirties—law school is like boot camp for writers. After some luck getting magazine features published and writing for “A Prairie Home Companion,” it seemed like I was on to something!

*Aaron:* I knew I wanted to be a published photographer when I was at Irma's Finland House in Virginia, Minnesota during college. I was home on Christmas break and I noticed a book from Finland that had a photographer with the last name of Hautala on the cover. At that moment I promised to myself, “Someday, that will be me.”

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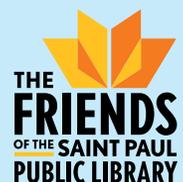
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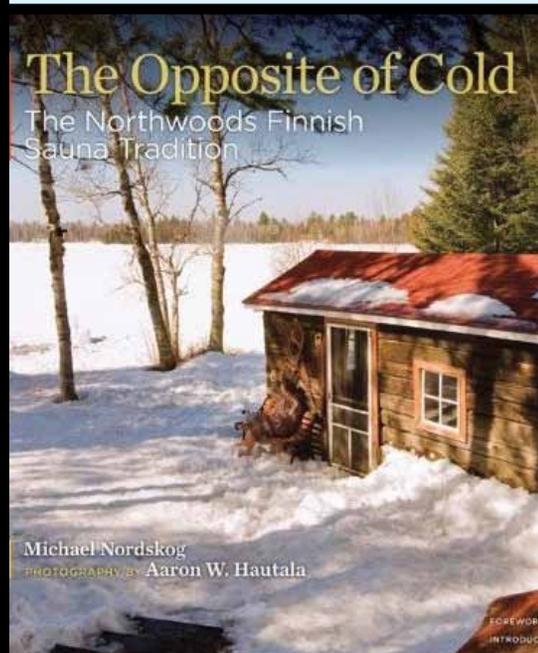
A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by The Minnesota Book Awards & The Friends of The Saint Paul Public Library

23RD ANNUAL

# MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

**General Nonfiction Winner**

*Category sponsored by Minnesota AFL-CIO*



***The Opposite of Cold:***  
***The Northwoods Finnish Sauna Tradition***

by Michael Nordskog  
photography by Aaron W. Hautala

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS

# The Opposite of Cold



## SUMMARY

Beginning with the origins of Finnish sauna and its arrival in North America, and continuing all the way to contemporary design, *The Opposite of Cold* is a commemoration of the history, culture, and practice of Finnish sauna in the Northwoods. With stunning photographs of unique and historic saunas of the region, Michael Nordskog and Aaron W. Hautala unveil the importance and beauty of sauna culture in modern Midwestern life.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. How did the book expand your knowledge of the Northwoods beyond what you learned about the sauna tradition?
3. How did the relationship between text and photography contribute to your reading experience?
4. Which image in *The Opposite of Cold* drew you in the most?
5. How is sauna distinct from other bathing traditions like Native American sweat lodges or the Turkish bath?
6. What are some other ethnic practices that have survived the melting pot to make our culture more interesting?
7. Why do you think the issue of nudity in the sauna is so fascinating to Americans?
8. Does the sauna tradition remind you of any traditions, rituals, or hobbies in your life or that of your family?
9. Would you prefer a posh, modern version of a sauna or a traditional, rustic sauna?
10. If you wrote a nonfiction book on some aspect of Midwestern life, what topic would you chose?



## ABOUT MICHAEL NORDSKOG AND AARON HAUTALA



(Aaron Hautala at left, Michael Nordskog at right)

*Michael Nordskog grew up in the heart of North American sauna country. He works as an attorney, writer, and editor, and he lives with his wife and three children on a farm near Viroqua, Wisconsin.*

*Learn more about Nordskog and his work at [www.michaelnordskog.wordpress.com](http://www.michaelnordskog.wordpress.com).*

*Aaron W. Hautala is creative director and owner of RedHouseMedia in Brainerd, Minnesota. He has helped launch a variety of magazines and was the founding art director at Lake Country Journal.*

*Learn more about Hautala and his work at [www.RedHouseMedia.com](http://www.RedHouseMedia.com).*



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