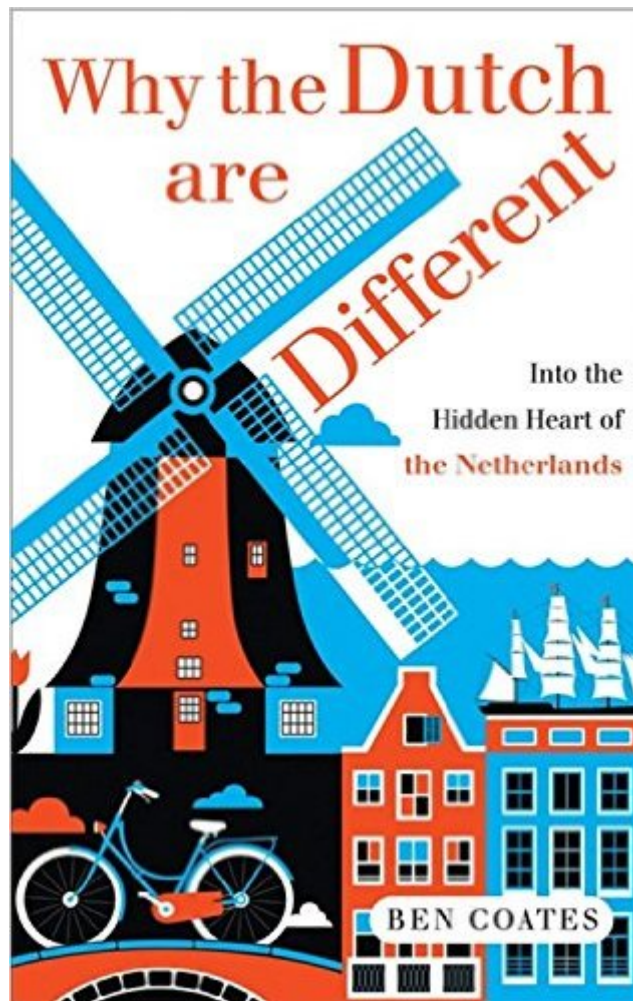


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Why The Dutch Are Different: A Journey Into The Hidden Heart Of The Netherlands



Synopsis

A SCOTSMAN TRAVEL BOOK OF THE YEAR Stranded at Schiphol airport, Ben Coates called up a friendly Dutch girl he'd met some months earlier. He stayed for dinner. Actually, he stayed for good. In the first book to consider the hidden heart and history of the Netherlands from a modern perspective, the author explores the length and breadth of his adopted homeland and discovers why one of the world's smallest countries is also so significant and so fascinating. It is a self-made country, the Dutch national character shaped by the ongoing battle to keep the water out from the love of dairy and beer to the attitude to nature and the famous tolerance. Ben Coates investigates what makes the Dutch the Dutch, why the Netherlands is much more than Holland and why the color orange is so important. Along the way he reveals why they are the world's tallest people and have the best carnival outside Brazil. He learns why Amsterdam's brothels are going out of business, who really killed Anne Frank, and how the Dutch manage to be richer than almost everyone else despite working far less. He also discovers a country which is changing fast, with the Dutch now questioning many of the liberal policies which made their nation famous. A personal portrait of a fascinating people, a sideways history and an entertaining travelogue, *Why the Dutch are Different* is the story of an Englishman who went Dutch. And loved it.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Recently I finished Bill Bryson's latest travel book, *Notes from Little Dribbling*. While my much beloved author writes in his usual educational style, like a favorite high school teacher, dear Bill is becoming a bit grumpier in his waning years largely due to the fact that it will never be 1957

again and that his three-year old grandchildren can work a computer better than he can. So as I had just decided that this latest work of his would have been more aptly titled "Bill Bryson's Great Big Book of Bitching", along comes Ben Coates' "Why the Dutch are Different". What a wonderful read. Intelligent and jaunty, Coates writes a spot-on description of life as an expat in the Netherlands. Braiding together his personal experiences with history, he presents a thought-provoking interpretation of how individuals and events over a vast sweep of time make the Dutch who they are. It's as if my wish that Bryson would cheer up and write a book about the Netherlands had been granted. Coates parties at carnival, gazes at antiquities on Museumnacht, sails down the Maas, sings at a war remembrance ceremony, attends a demonstration, and solemnly visits the staging camp for Auschwitz as the backdrop of the book. Then selecting the most influential events and characters that over a vast sweep of time shaped Dutch society, he presents a chronicle of the Netherlands that is comprehensive without being tedious. This is something of a feat for a 287-page book. As an expat living in the Netherlands myself, some of Coates' personal experiences made me sigh with delight and recognition.

In *Why the Dutch Are Different*, a Brit living in the Netherlands writes a mix of travelogue, history, anecdotes and personal narrative apparently with the intent of showing just why the Dutch are different. Coates visits throughout the Netherlands and, in a rambling way, gives a great deal of information about each location. For the most part, though, this information gives a feeling of how the Dutch came to be "Dutch", but not why they are different. Frankly, he covers that early in the book, with the reason for the Dutch being how they are due to the obvious answer of land and water issues--an answer which honestly does not take nearly three hundred pages to explain. This book is densely packed with information; so much so that it is overwhelming. Since much of it didn't seem to relate to the point I was expecting him to eventually make (why the Dutch are different), and since the prose was not engaging, I found myself wanting to skim and skip. I think this book would be best read by picking it up occasionally and reading one or two of the short essays, instead of trying to read it all at once. Coates seems ambivalent toward the Dutch. At one moment he is admiring their ingenuity, the next he is using stereotypes in a derogatory way. I'm sure it's his way of introducing humor ("... shared the common Dutch belief that there was no such thing as too much hair gel" and "towns with names that could choke a child") but it seemed disrespectful to the people that he was showcasing. Furthermore, while Coates writes well technically, there was no sparkle to his prose; he never pulled me in and made me genuinely interested. I don't know if this is the fault of the writer, or of the reader.

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