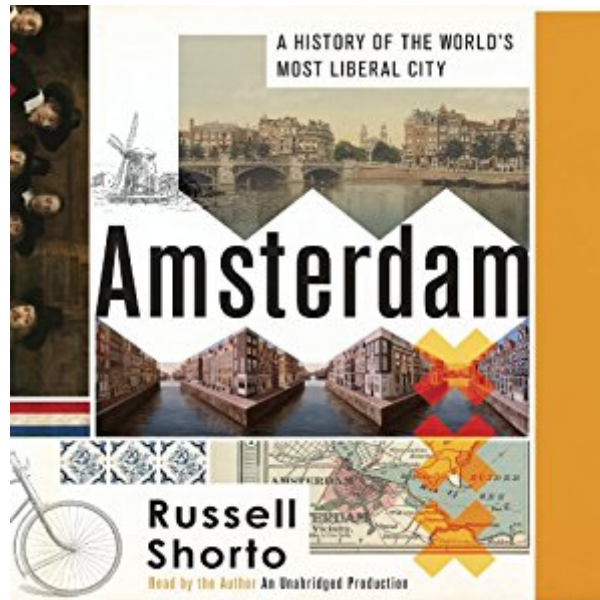


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Amsterdam: A History Of The World's Most Liberal City



Synopsis

An endlessly entertaining portrait of the city of Amsterdam and the ideas that make it unique, by the author of the acclaimed *Island at the Center* the World Tourists know Amsterdam as a picturesque city of low-slung brick houses lining tidy canals; student travelers know it for its legal brothels and hash bars; art lovers know it for Rembrandt's glorious portraits. But the deeper history of Amsterdam, what makes it one of the most fascinating places on Earth, is bound up in its unique geography - the constant battle of its citizens to keep the sea at bay and the democratic philosophy that this enduring struggle fostered. Amsterdam is the font of liberalism, in both its senses. Tolerance for free thinking and free love make it a place where, in the words of one of its mayors, "craziness is a value". But the city also fostered the deeper meaning of liberalism, one that profoundly influenced America: political and economic freedom. Amsterdam was home not only to religious dissidents and radical thinkers but to the world's first great global corporation. In this effortlessly erudite account, Russell Shorto traces the idiosyncratic evolution of Amsterdam, showing how such disparate elements as herring anatomy, naked Anabaptists parading through the streets, and an intimate gathering in a 16th-century wine-tasting room had a profound effect on Dutch - and world - history. Weaving in his own experiences of his adopted home, Shorto provides an ever-surprising, intellectually engaging story of Amsterdam from the building of its first canals in the 1300s, through its brutal struggle for independence, its golden age as a vast empire, to its complex present in which its cherished ideals of liberalism are under siege.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 11 hours and 25 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Random House Audio

Audible.com Release Date: October 22, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00EIGNBF8

Best Sellers Rank: #75 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Europe #232 in Books >

Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events #392 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources

Customer Reviews

I'm partly Dutch by descent, which is why I opted to receive a review copy from , when given my choice of Vine products. So I'm predisposed toward the subject. But then, anyone who buys the book would feel the same, so there goes my justification for a disclaimer. If you're reading this, you're interested in Amsterdam. Now that we've established that bit of obviousness...If you're coming into this book with little or no knowledge of Amsterdam you will be blown away by the depth of the detail, the interesting insights and lesser-known history. If you're coming into this book with some knowledge of this city, you'll find the same. All history should be written this well. It's so approachable and to some extent personal as historian Shorto has spent several years of his life in the city. The prose is smooth; it flows. It's a delight to read, so fascinating I hated putting it down. I even read it in the bathtub and I'm not a bathtub reader. And that is actually a positive point, though it sounds a little silly. Okay, a lot silly. Reading this book you'll learn what makes the Dutch such determined people, how they managed to turn boggy land into a city, how many things they pioneered - including the stock market. The Dutch East India Company is covered in detail, as well as the tulip craze and how all that nuttiness came about. You'll meet Rembrandt, learning the connection between his life and that of other Dutch names of note. The most brilliant part is how Shorto weaves it all together, how he connects all the dots, explaining all the interrelationships between people you'll have heard of, by way of people you probably haven't. I enjoy nonfiction, and love history, so I read the genre consistently and know it fairly well.

As I stood outside the Central Station one October, after half-a-century's absence, waiting for my daughter to purchase tram tickets, I realised, when the first icy blast from the North Sea bit into my cheek; when I heard the unforgettable cries of the seagulls as they dipped and soared above the canals and gabled roofs; when the musical bells chimed from the churches, Amsterdam is as addictive as the product peddled in one of its infamous coffee shops. I therefore looked forward to reading Russell Shorto's account of the city in which I learned Dutch, studied music at the Conservatory, married a Dutchman, gave birth to my first child, and left regretfully after four years. How I wish that I had had the author's history with me then, when I was wandering through the narrow streets alongside the grachten--the moats that circle the city, always conscious of the beauty of its art and architecture; of the contradictions of life in what I was assured was the Venice of the North. Instead, with the self-centered blindness of a twenty-year old, I was completely ignorant of the layers of history that went beyond what I saw in the tall houses with their quaint hooks, or what I saw depicted in the immense painting, Captain Banningcocq's Sharpshooters (aka Rembrandt's

"Night Watch") in the Rijksmuseum. For me, Mr Shorto's "Amsterdam" is the most interesting when he peels away the historical layers of the brick buildings, moving from present to past.

Having fallen in love with Russel Shorto's 'The Island at the Center of the World', and greatly enjoying his articles in the NYT, I was eagerly anticipating this book. And I was not disappointed. In this relatively short history, Shorto weaves his own personal experiences of Amsterdam with the history of the city. In particular, as he shows how Liberalism (note the capital L here: this is Liberalism in the classic sense - personal freedom, economic freedom, individual freedoms and individual rights, etc - not in the American political spectrum sense) defined the city he convincingly relays how the city's unique geography allowed Liberalism to grow and thrive. In particular, the concept of 'gedogen' - hard to translate, but sort of like toleration of what is illegal by not enforcing laws against something - seems to have defined the city of Amsterdam from early on. Beginning with the miracle of the wafer, Amsterdam grew from such humble beginning. Yes, around a wafer. But hey, it was a different century and rather than tourists flocking to museums, they instead flocked to religious items. So why not a wafer? Shorto then shows how fishing and shipping enriched the city before getting to the best part of the book - the Golden Age of Amsterdam of the 17th century. Probably the highlight of the book for me because this was the age that would then go on to influence New Amsterdam, and through New Amsterdam the whole of the US. Plus there was an excellent section on how the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 in England was actually a true invasion, despite what British historians may have led you to believe since.

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