
Opening Extract from...

City-Pick
Amsterdam

Edited by
Heather Reyes and Victor Schiferli

Published by Oxygen Books

city-pick

Perfect gems of city writing

Amsterdam

edited by Heather Reyes and Victor Schiferli

introduced by **Sam Garrett**
translator of
Geert Mak's *In Europe*

city-pick

AMSTERDAM

Oxygen Books

Foundation for the
Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature

Published by Oxygen Books Ltd. 2010

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978–0–9559700–2–3

Typeset in Sabon by Bookcraft Limited, Stroud, Gloucestershire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Henry Ling Ltd, Dorset Press, Dorchester

Praise for the series

'Brilliant … the best way to get under the skin of a city. The perfect read for travellers and book lovers of all ages' – **Kate Mosse, best-selling author of *Labyrinth***

'An inviting new series of travel guides which collects some of the best writing on European cities to give a real flavour of the place … Such an *idée formidable*, it seems amazing it hasn't been done before'

Editor's Pick, *The Bookseller*

'This impressive little series' – ***Sunday Telegraph***

'An attractive-looking list of destination-based literature anthologies … a great range of writers' – ***The Independent***

' … something for everyone – an ideal gift' – ***Travel Bookseller***

'All of a sudden the traditional travel guide seems a little dull. *The Rough Guide* and *Lonely Planet* series have conditioned us to expect certain things: accommodation listings from budget to luxury, the lowdown on the best bars, restaurants and cafés, information on all the obvious sights, and the kind of prose which even makes civil war, poverty and dictatorial government seem as if they were established just to make our trip more interesting.

city-pick offers a more soulful guide to the metropolises of the world in the company of journalists, musicians, playwrights, bloggers and novelists past and present. They are beautifully produced books and can be read from cover to cover or just dipped into. They not only fill you with an intense desire to pack bags and head away, but also to seek out the complete texts from which the extracts are taken.

Oxygen Books is restoring intellectual discovery to travelling, inviting would-be adventurers to view cities as irrepressible compositions of wisdom, wit, conflict and culture, rather than excuses to get the digital camera out and tick off another sight from the list. A very hearty bravo indeed!' – **Garan Holcombe, The Good Web Guide**

'The perfect books for the armchair traveller as well as those of you visiting cities around the globe' – **Lovereading**

'A breath of fresh air … each volume offers what it says on the tin: *perfect gems of city writing*' – ***Mslexia***

Editor's Note

My first encounter with Amsterdam was through two innocently banal but irritatingly memorable songs from early childhood, one about an unlikely 'little mouse with clogs on' who lived in a windmill 'in old Amsterdam', the other a love-song, 'Tulips from Amsterdam'. Much later I heard Belgian singer Jacques Brel's powerful tribute to a different, darker side of the city in his equally unforgettable song beginning 'In old Amsterdam … '. More recently, I discovered 'the' Amsterdam singer, the late Ramses Shaffy, whose haunting performance of 'It's so quiet in Amsterdam' added a deeper, more appreciative dimension to how the city presented itself to me in song. If one can talk about 'the truth of the city', it probably lies somewhere between these four songs – between the '*leuk*' (a Dutch word perhaps best translated as 'cute'), the straightforwardly romantic, the hauntingly dark, and the movingly lyrical.

One cannot help falling in love with Amsterdam, as I certainly did on my very first visit – its watery light and the modest beauty of the houses that line the canals, the exquisite Vondel Park, the wealth of art in the city's museums, and even the bicycles. The length of the first section of this book testifies to the deep affection in which the city is – and has been – held by a wide range of people, both natives and foreign visitors. And this, like the collection as a whole, is only the tip of a possible ice-berg. In fact, the vast quantity of marvellous writing about Amsterdam has made the process of selection both a great mind-expanding joy and a source of frustration as there simply wasn't room to include everything that we would have liked.

For the wide and fascinating range of material from Dutch writers translated into English for the first time here, I am hugely indebted to my diligent and enthusiastic co-editor in

Amsterdam, Victor Schiferli. His vast knowledge of writing in Dutch, of a national literature that has yet to be more fully discovered and appreciated by an often translation-phobic Anglophone readership, has made the process of creating this book a personal education for me of the most satisfying and pleasurable kind. I am also grateful for additional extracts and editorial suggestions from translator Laura Vroomen. To move beyond Dutch authors already well-known in translation – such as Geert Mak and Cees Nooteboom – and discover the delights of writers such as Martin Bril, Stefan Hertmans, Maarten Asscher, Marcel Möring, Doeschka Meijsing, Abdelkadi Benali, and H. M. van den Brink, has been a delightful journey that I hope the reader will enjoy as much as I did. And it has been with an ever-growing sense of gratitude to the many excellent (and so often under-appreciated) translators that I have encountered these writers for the first time. The support of the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature for much of the translation cost has been greatly appreciated.

We hope that this collection will give a renewed sense of Amsterdam's beauties but also take you beyond these to the deeper realities of the people, culture, history and even the difficulties of a city that has played such a major part in the story of European civilization.

Heather Reyes

Contents

'I ♥ Amsterdam'

'Water, water everywhere … '

'Must see … '

Art seen in Amsterdam

The Amsterdam-nation

Amsterdam the tolerant

In old Amsterdam

World War II – the occupied city

That was then … this is now

* = already translated from Dutch
** = translated from Dutch for this anthology

Introducing Amsterdam …
by Sam Garrett

Nothing about Amsterdam is linear, nothing is black and white. Amsterdam is a kaleidoscope of earth, water and sky, of cloud, glass and brick. Many of the streets you see and down which you trundle by bike or tram were once water. Much of the water you see was once part of the city's system of low-friction roads. A topsy-turvy world.

Perhaps it is that unpredictability, running contrary to what one might expect of a city so endowed with tradition, history and culture that makes Amsterdam attractive to outsiders, to nonconformists and adventurers. Estimates have it that some 25% of the population of the high-rent ring of central canals consists of expats – the lost boys and girls of our age. At many medium-sized local elementary schools, the parents may easily represent more than three dozen nationalities: Amsterdam itself is official home to more than 170.

And within even a single nationality, these new Amsterdammers may range from the successful New York entrepreneur and his chain of hip muffin-and-espresso shops to the toothless and musically blessed jazzman Chet Baker, who died here in 1988 after plummeting from his hotel window like a wayward angel: people are drawn to this city because it allows you – for better or for worse – to be yourself. Or, as Alain de Botton says elsewhere in this volume: 'What we find exotic abroad may be what we hunger for in vain at home.'

That magnetic attraction on outsiders is nothing new: one of Amsterdam's most famous citizens, philosopher Baruch Spinoza, was (as Ian Buruma notes here) the son of Sephardic refugees; Rembrandt van Rijn – in many ways the city's international figurehead – was a provincial boy who found acclaim

in the big city. More recently, director Quentin Tarantino lived and worked here for a time, as did rock star Dave Matthews, who busked for pennies not far from the house where René Descartes lived in the early 17th century. At the end of her life, the 'high priestess of soul', Nina Simone, took refuge along these same canals and performed in local clubs.

Amsterdam is, and has been for almost eight hundred years, a playground to the world. That wild and giddy place you and perhaps even your parents talked about running away to, the breathtaking labyrinth Geoff Dyer has portrayed so well in 'Hotel Oblivion', the city where, as gangster Vincent Vega in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* noted, people eat mayonnaise on their French fries and drink beer in movie theatres, where everything forbidden or outré at home has suddenly become legal and normal, the place John and Yoko chose to hold their first 'Bed-In', the home of the notorious and aptly named 'Banana Bar', the cradle of soft-drug liberalism, the place where anything goes …

Amsterdam is all of that and, in keeping with its non-linear nature, none of that as well. To set the record straight, for example, prostitution in the Netherlands is seen as just another variation on freelance work, and therefore taxable and regulated. The possession and sale of marijuana and its derivatives, on the other hand (hilariously portrayed in the excerpt from Tommy Wieringa's *Joe Speedboat*), are *not* legal here: they are 'allowed', within limits. Distinctions of little interest to the visitor, but all the more to politicians exercising a peculiarly Dutch brand of domestic Realpolitik.

For, paradoxically enough, if Amsterdam is wild and giddy, that wildness and giddiness are made possible by virtue of Dutch sobriety and pragmatism. Gambling, prostitution and the use of controlled substances, along with the official hours for beating the dust out of carpets in housing-association tracts and the location of official 'doggy toilets', are regulated here – if

not always by law, then certainly by ordinance and decree. This playground to the world is padded against falls by an intricate safety net of regulations and social covenants. In Holland – the birthplace, after all, of Western *laissez-faire* – your right to do as you please is boundless … until it runs up against the sacred boundary of *my* right to do as *I* please. The Dutch often speak of themselves, with a hint of perverse pride, as 'Calvinists'. And they are right, in that they are staunchly tolerant as a rule, almost overbearingly so at times, and have little regard for anyone who is not. And they do, really, eat mayonnaise on their French Fries.

Beyond the romantic canals and bridges, the city itself has many faces. Amsterdam North, for example, on the far bank of the IJ, is only five minutes by water from downtown; in soul and being it is as antithetical to the nonchalant flair of Real Amsterdam as the Land of the Ants is to the Land of the Grasshoppers. Take the free ferry behind the central train station on a windy workaday morning with a tang of salt in the air and you may find yourself back in the staid Holland of the 1950s – with crowds of office workers clutching their bag lunches in one hand, the handlebars of their bike in the other, with madly wheeling gulls and some of the most beautifully melancholic urban scenery in all of northern Europe. Travel by tram to the 'Southern Axis' at the edge of town, however, and you will see some of the strangest of what post-modern architecture has to offer – including a bank building in the form of a shoe (the Dutch call it 'The Skate').

Hopefully, as you read on in this anthology and find out more about this multi-city, you will be struck as I was by two recurring motifs. The first is expressed in phrases like "I had a Dutch friend … " or " … a Dutch friend of mine, who … " The whole world, it seems, has a Dutch friend. For the Dutch may be Calvinists, but they are inquisitive, worldly-wise Calvinists at that, with a flair for languages and an admiration

for travellers. And they have the tendency to recognize a good thing when they see it.

The second recurrent theme is what we might call the "Amsterdam epiphany": you are staring out the window, you are crossing a bridge, you are cycling through traffic, when the heavens open. Amsterdam suddenly feels as right as your favourite pair of old slippers, as heartbreakingly beautiful as that lover you once tossed aside during an eclipse of reason. You wonder whether you will ever have the heart to leave this place. As the writing in this volume proves, this same epiphany has dawned through the long years on the likes of Charles de Montesqieu, Dubravka Ugresic, Alain de Botton, Simona Luff, Chris Ewan and many, many more.

Fortunately, I am no exception. Thirty years ago, not long after I moved to Amsterdam, I was riding my bicycle one blustery February afternoon along the Singel canal, not far from the city's central train station. Suddenly, the sun broke through the towering cumulus clouds and the houses along the far side were bathed in a light that seemed to etch sharp lines around each brick, every notch in every gable, that threw fat black shadows between the crazily teetering house fronts. Dutch light, I realized, this was the famously oblique Dutch light. As a university student I had loved German Expressionist cinema, and here, in an instant, I remembered why, and saw where Robert Wiene could have gained his inspiration for the weirdly skewed architecture of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, why Werner Herzog had later chosen a Dutch mediaeval cityscape for his 1979 remake of *Nosferatu*. It was the unbending light made immortal by Ruysdael and his fellow Dutch masters, throwing into relief an old city going into its eighth century of sinking back, with raucous good grace, into the morass from whence it came.

As aboard all sinking ships, of course, gaiety in Amsterdam goes hand-in-hand with a remarkable, almost heroic empathy, as you will see in Simon Carmiggelt's matchless anecdote about

the Nazi beer belly. It is that same dry-eyed, ironic bent that gave birth in Holland to the centuries-old tradition of the *stadskroniek*, which expresses itself in vignettes of city life so precise as to seem written on the head of a pin. In addition to Carmiggelt's musings on café encounters, the world of Dutch letters has been graced by other chroniclers, more recently among them the late Martin Bril, who wisely followed Admiral Michiel de Ruyter's maxim that 'in Amsterdam, a gentleman goes by foot'. Before his untimely death, Bril's pavement-pounding resulted in a series of columns, some of which are found here, that not only nail down the peculiarities of the Dutch capital, but at the same time underscore its universality and, therefore, its timeless humanity.

Giddy Amsterdam, staid Amsterdam. Empress, fishwife, lady of the night. Hero, artist, traitor, beggar. Visionary, Calvinist and clown. It is that timeless humanity of which this anthology sings.

SAM GARRETT, a prize-winning literary translator and writer, has been living in Amsterdam since the early 1980s. He is currently working on a book about his experiences as an American émigré in Holland.

‘I ♥ Amsterdam’

We fly in with prize-winning Dutch writer Marcel Möring.

It was cold, that day, and I was tired, the way people are tired after a long trip: too little sleep, your mind both here, in your body, and there, somewhere else, it doesn’t matter where. Around me, the silent company of men in white shirts, Business Class, the *Financial Times* or *Newsweek* or an airport thriller on their lap, head against the papery headrest, mouth open slightly. Outside, under the wing lights, where the clouds grew thin, so thin that the giant Dutch scale-model glimmered through, I could see the tiny houses with their tiny gardens, the straight grey stripes of road, the floodlit well of a soccer field, wisps of white steam above chimneys. And I felt myself slipping into the comfortable coat of my native land. Half my life I had spent in other countries; I had left, as a child, with my parents and Uncle

Herman, for America, returned and gone to secondary school here and then travelled the world like a man who was searching for something but didn't know what or where, yet despite all that travelling and roaming — I knew it the moment the asphalt spaghetti around Amsterdam came into view — despite all that, I was a Dutchman. Not a feeling of national pride, the Golden Age simply a curious fact in the history books, not the faintest notion of national grandeur. Cheese, order, care, coffee, sturdy dykes, hesitant forests, straight canals, square meadows, potato fields under the summer sun, slopes they called hills, hills called mountains, long rows of yellow brick houses on long red brick streets and rectangular gardens with pruned conifers.

Sunset swept over this land, while down below, toy cars went shooting along the motorways, the runway lights of Schiphol lay in the fields like a fallen Christmas tree. I thought: This is where I want to die.

Marcel Möring, *In Babylon* (1998)
translated from the Dutch by Stacey Knecht

* * *

Australian Sean Condon made Amsterdam his home for three years … and adores it!

No matter where I have been I am always very grateful to get back to Amsterdam, especially when I'm returning from large, polluted, crowded and ceaselessly noisy cities like London, Paris and New York, or just plain depressing joints like Düsseldorf and Hanover. Amsterdam feels like it's the perfect weight and density, and the city's quietness, the sedate calm of the canals, has an almost narcotic effect on my jangled nerves. There's even a comforting familiarity about hearing the Dutch language again (although this wears off after about one minute). And as I sit on a tram or in a cab, ticking off landmarks on my route home, I think about how I will soon be taking out my keys and unlocking the door to the flat, unpacking then putting the suitcase back up on top of the wardrobe, breathing

slowly and deeply. And even though I am not actually there yet — I'm just anticipating it — I feel as though I have truly come home.

Sean Condon, *My 'Dam Life* (2003)

* * *

Clive, in Ian McEwan's novel, Amsterdam*, tells us why* he *loves the city so much.*

The flight was two hours late into Schiphol airport. Clive took the train to the Central Station and from there set off on foot for his hotel in the soft grey afternoon light. While he was crossing the Bridge it came back to him, what a calm and civilised city Amsterdam was. He took a wide detour westwards in order to stroll along Brouwersgracht. His suitcase, after all, was very light. So consoling, to have a body of water down the middle of a street. Such a tolerant, open-minded, grown-up sort of place: the beautiful brick and carved timber warehouses converted into tasteful apartments, the modest Van Gogh bridges, the understated street furniture, the intelligent, unstuffy-looking Dutch on their bikes with their level-headed children sitting behind. Even the shopkeepers looked like professors, the street sweepers like jazz musicians. There was never a city more rationally ordered.

Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam* (1998)

* * *

In The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton uses his arrival at Schiphol and a visit to Amsterdam to meditate on our pleasures in 'the exotic' when we travel abroad: a tap, a jam jar and even a sign at the airport can be an insight into the different national character of the Dutch.*

On disembarking at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, only a few steps inside the terminal, I am struck by a sign hanging from the ceiling that announces the ways to the arrivals hall, the exit and the transfer desks. It is a bright yellow sign, one metre high and two

across, simple in design, a plastic fascia in an illuminated aluminium box suspended on steel struts from a ceiling webbed with cables and air-conditioning ducts. Despite its simplicity, even mundanity, the sign delights me, a delight for which the adjective 'exotic', though unusual, seems apt. The exoticism is located in particular areas: in the double *a* of *Aankomst*, in the neighbourliness of a *u* and an *i* in *Uitgang,* in the use of English subtitles, in the word for desks, *balies*, and in the choice of practical modernist fonts, Frutiger or Univers.

If the sign provokes such pleasure, it is in part because it offers the first conclusive evidence of having arrived elsewhere. It is a symbol of abroad. Though it may not seem distinctive to the casual eye, such a sign would never exist in precisely this form in my own country. There it would be less yellow, the typeface would be softer and more nostalgic, there would — out of greater indifference to the confusion of foreigners — probably be no subtitles and the language would contain no double *a*s — a repetition in which I sensed, confusedly, the presence of another history and mindset.

A plug socket, a bathroom tap, a jam jar or an airport sign may tell us more than its designers intended, it may speak of the nation that made it. And the nation that had made the sign at Schiphol Airport seemed very far from my own. A bold archaeologist of national character might have traced the influence of the lettering back to the De Stijl movement of the early twentieth century, the prominence of the English subtitles to the Dutch openness towards foreign influences and the foundation of the East India Company in 1602 and the overall simplicity of the sign to the Calvinist aesthetic that became a part of Holland's identity during the war between the United Provinces and Spain in the sixteenth century.

That a sign could evolve so differently in two places was evidence of a simple but pleasing idea: that countries are diverse and practices variable across borders. Yet difference alone would not have been enough to elicit pleasure, or not for long. Difference had to seem like an improvement on what my own country

was capable of. If I called the Schiphol sign exotic, it was because it succeeded in suggesting, vaguely but intensely, that the country which had made it and which lay beyond the *uitgang* might in critical ways prove more congenial than my own to my temperament and concerns. The sign was a promise of happiness. […]

In Amsterdam, I took a room in a small hotel in the Jordaan district and, after lunch in a café (*roggebrood met haring en uitjes*), went for a walk in the western parts of the city. In Flaubert's Alexandria, the exotic had collected around camels, Arabs peacefully fishing and guttural cries. Modern-day Amsterdam provided different, but analogous examples: buildings with elongated pale pink bricks put together with curiously white mortar (far more regular than English or North American brickwork and exposed to view unlike the bricks on French or German buildings), long rows of narrow apartment buildings from the early twentieth century with large ground-floor windows; bicycles parked outside every house or block (recalling university towns); a democratic scruffiness to street furniture; an absence of ostentatious buildings; straight streets interspersed with small parks, suggesting the hand of planners with ideas of a socialist garden city. In one street lined with uniform apartment buildings, I stopped by a red front door and felt an intense longing to spend the rest of my life there. Above me on the second floor, I could see an apartment with three large windows and no curtains. The walls were painted white and decorated with a single large painting covered with small blue and red dots. There was an oak desk against a wall, a large bookshelf and an armchair. I wanted the life that this space implied. I wanted a bicycle. I wanted to put my key through the red front door every evening. I wanted to stand by the curtainless window at dusk looking out at an identical apartment opposite and snack my way through an *erwensoep met roggebroood en spek* before retiring to read in bed in a white room with white sheets. […]

My love for the apartment building was based on what I perceived to be its modesty. The building was comfortable, but not grand. It suggested a society attracted to a financial mean. There was an honesty in the design. Whereas front doorways in London were prone to ape the look of classical temples, in Amsterdam they accepted their status, they avoided pillars and plaster, they settled on neat undecorated brick. The building was modern in the best sense, it spoke of order, cleanliness and light.

Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (2002)

* * *

Two eminent eighteenth-century Frenchmen were great admirers of Amsterdam: political philosopher Charles de Montesquieu (1689–1755), and the even more famous Enlightenment philosopher, dramatist and early 'human rights' campaigner Voltaire (1694–1778).

The streets of Amsterdam are beautiful, clean, wide. There are broad canals lined with trees. In the principal roads of the town, boats pass directly in front of the houses. I like Amsterdam more than Venice because, in Amsterdam, one has water without being deprived of land. The houses are clean inside and neatly built on the outside, all in a similar style; the roads are straight and wide; in a word, it's one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Charles de Montesquieu, *Travels* [*Voyages*] (1719)
translated from the French by Erica King

* * *

I looked with respect upon that city which is the warehouse of the world. There were more than a thousand vessels in the port. Of the five hundred thousand people who live in Amsterdam, there is not among them a single shirker, not one who is poor, arrogant or insolent. We met the governor going about on foot without lackeys in the midst of the general populace. One does

not see there anyone who has to pay court; they don't line up to watch a prince go past; they know only work and modesty.

Voltaire, *Letters* [*Correspondance*] (1714–1743)
translated from the French by Erica King

* * *

A city of 'sky, glass and water' – Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresic makes us feel the thrill of it all …

The heart of the town had the form of a partially bisected cobweb. First came Magere Brug, whose filigree made me think of a dragonfly, then the Chinese fish shop at Nieuwmarkt with its wriggling catch, then the Waterlooplein flea market. The scenes flashed by before me, fragile, lace-like, limpid like the caps on the girls' heads in the painting by Nicolaas van der Waay. I saw canals overhung with shady trees; I saw the façades of the houses along the canals – the Herengracht, the Keizersgracht, the Prinsengracht and Singel – in neat rows like pearls; I saw Munttoren, the flower market and Artis, and took in the heavy, warm, intoxicating sight of the Botanical Museum. The entire city lay before me, a city of sky, glass and water. And it was my home. […]

I suddenly realized that I lived in the largest doll's house in the world. I refused to look out of the window. What would I see? Only the giant pupil in the giant eye of a child.

Then I would alter my perspective and Amsterdam would again become 'one of the most beautiful cities in the world', a 'desert rose'. I thought of desert winds ingesting indifferent desert sand, grinding it with their teeth, burnishing it with their burning tongues and spitting out a stone flower. On rainy days, when the sky came down so low it seemed to rest on the roofs, the stone rose had a dirty, ghastly cast to it. But the moment the sky lifted, the 'rose' would fill with light and shine with a glow that left me breathless.

Dubravka Ugresic, *The Ministry of Pain* (2005)
translated from the Croatian by Michael Henry Heim