



Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour

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In WATCHING THE ENGLISH anthropologist Kate Fox takes a revealing look at the quirks, habits and foibles of the English people. She puts the English national character under her anthropological microscope, and finds a strange and fascinating culture, governed by complex sets of unspoken rules and byzantine codes of behaviour. The rules of weather-speak. The ironic-gnome rule. The reflex apology rule. The paranoid-pantomime rule. Class indicators and class anxiety tests. The money-talk taboo and many more ...Through a mixture of anthropological analysis and her own unorthodox experiments (using herself as a reluctant guinea-pig), Kate Fox discovers what these unwritten behaviour codes tell us about Englishness.

Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour Details

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Elizabeth George says

This book was sent to me by my English publisher, and it took me a while to read as I made it my daily breakfast reading instead of my leisure reading. For anyone who has traveled in England and experienced some of the unusual aspects of the English "character" -- such as never, upon pain of death, make eye contact with someone on the Tube--this is an amusing read as the author, a social anthropologist, tries to work out why her fellow countrymen are as they are. Great fun to read.

Guy says

If only there were a book like this for every country and people! It has been a long time since I have laughed as much while reading a book... and I'm not sure that I have ever read so many excerpts of a book out loud to my wife. If you have ever wondered why the English behave the way they do, then run (do not walk) to buy this book.

Kate Fox is an anthropologist after my own heart (when I went on an expedition, it was through the Alps rather than the Himalayas) -- uninterested in the "macho" obsessions of her colleagues who are forever rushing off to suffer in jungles and deserts in order to elucidate the obscure beliefs and rituals of minor tribes, she has chosen to focus on the much larger but just as bizarre tribe that lives outside (and inside) her house: the English. And they (we) really are bizarre, when you really pay close attention to them (us).

Her method is that of the participant observer, forever eavesdropping in pubs, trains, buses, cafes, and wherever else she can, formulating theories about rules that would explain the strange behaviour she witnesses, and then testing them by clever questioning of, and ingenious experiments on, mostly unsuspecting "informants".

Her writing is brilliant: acutely intelligent and ferociously funny. And in my opinion she succeeds in her goal -- identifying the cultural "genome" of the English. After reading "Watching the English" I feel like I understand both my countrymen and myself much better than I did before. I can't recommend this wonderful book highly enough.

Jafar says

I probably should have read this book sooner. I learned a lot about the Englishness from this book that I hadn't noticed personally – but that just could be because of my lack of real immersion in the English culture. If you work for a high-tech company and live in London, you won't necessarily see many English people around . In spite of my limited interaction with the English, this book should still be very useful to me. Next time that an English coworker of mine takes off a week from work to redo his kitchen and then for the next few months bitches (or moans, as they say here) about what a nightmare it was, I know that I'm seeing a typical English behavior(u)r. (I still use the American spelling of English. English spelling is

confusing as it is, without any need to write *behaviour* and *cheque* and *programme*.)

I have to say that Fox is incredibly observant. The sheer power of her observation of the details of the English way of life makes this book a very entertaining read and makes up for her lack of (the well-advertised) English wit and humor (she tries, though). Obviously, anything that she says about the English is just an over-generalization and can be contested by many contrary examples – but that's just an unavoidable part of doing anthropology. She lays out a few basic rules of Englishness, and then tries to explain different aspects of the English life according to those rules. And it works rather well. You feel like you're reading a scientific theory of the Englishness that is well-supported by the evidence.

There are things about the English that I personally like and they suit me well. I have no problem with their stereotype of being reserved and buttoned-up. While there's some truth to this stereotype, it's not as bad as others make it out to be. I find the English "reservation" more tolerable than the forced smiles and affected friendliness of Southern California. The English have the good sense of considering any gushing outpouring of sentimentality to be embarrassing and uncomfortable. No one is allowed to take themselves too seriously here – I've noticed this fact myself and very much like it. The serious and self-important tone of American business executives and the hand-on-heart speeches of American politicians who act like they really believe themselves will only make people roll their eyes here. And then there are things that I like less, but I'll be a good guest and keep quiet for now.

Overall, this is a really great and amusing book for anyone who lives in England (including the English themselves) or is interested in the English people. The introduction about the theory of doing anthropological research was very interesting to me as well.

Trin says

A really amusing anthropological look at the English by an Englishwoman. Fox's sense of humor is what really makes this book; it's a bit long and repetitive at parts—skewing too much toward being an academic text when what I want (need) it to be is a work of popular science—but Fox's own innate "Oh, come off it!" reaction always pulls through in the end. Somewhat frightening: how much of Fox's "grammar of Englishness" I find applicable to myself—social awkwardness, humor, cynicism, belief in fair play... Bloody hell! Sodding, blimey, shagging, knickers, bollocks... Oh, God! *I'm English!*

Josh Friedlander says

I'm South African, meaning warmer than the English and nicer than the Australians, or so I always thought. Reducing whole nations to a few characteristics is a dangerous game, but never feels more right than when done by Kate Fox, an anthropologist whose keen intellect shines through this book, despite her commendable repudiation of academic jargon and pretension. With typically English humour and modesty (or so her book would have it) she explains her project, an anthropological survey of domestic English life, as merely the laziest and safest option available.

In short, she sees the single defining core of the English as "social dis-ease", in response to which they have developed a number of coping mechanisms - primarily an all-pervasive sense of humour, and a strong belief

in courtesy (often manifested 'negatively', i.e leaving people alone). She identifies English values such as common sense, a tendency to 'Eeyorish' gloominess (the "typical!" syndrome), and a powerful class-consciousness (though it isn't acceptable to talk about this last one publicly).

Occasionally Fox's obvious fondness for her subject can take away from her objectivity - she has quite a few fuzzy rationalisations or jokey excuses for things of which an objective observer of a faraway tribe might take a more jaundiced view. But of course, this is something of an insider's book - for either English people, or those keenly familiar with them. I found plenty of myself in this book: my tendency to apologise too much, my need for privacy, my moderate and reasonably common-sensical outlook on life (what Fox dubs "Empiricism"). To name something is to know it better; this guide is a valuable contribution to unraveling the mystery that is the English race.

Jill Hutchinson says

It is hard to really rate this book as some portions are extremely humorous, while others are dry as dust. Basically, this is a look at the English (not British) people from a sociological point of view and an explanation as to why they behave the way they behave. If you take this book too seriously, the English will appear to be an alien race, put upon this earth while you weren't looking; the author, an anthropologist by profession, gives the reader room to take some of the information lightly as does she. (She is English, btw.)

She touches on everyday situations and how the English have "rules" which govern how one should act.....and she lists these rules by class without being demeaning. She covers such things as talking about the weather, pub talk, rules of the road, excessive privacy and much more. I have actually observed some of these rules in action while in England but obviously was unaware of others and acted "inappropriately" which may have caused my English companions to react with the typical English sign of disfavor, the raised eyebrow!

If you are an Anglophile or are going to England any time soon, you might want to read this book. It is entertaining despite some of the boring sections.

Terry says

I'm struggling to finish this book. It could be a brilliant book but it is just simply boring. The book methodically attempts to analyse the character of the English and observe rules of social interaction etc. It is profoundly middle-class London-centric, unnecessarily wordy, attempting to be partly research and partly humourous. It's all been done before. It misses out great swathes of the population who don't talk about the weather or say "pleased to meet you", namely most people under 40. The authors view seems very much of a 1950's Britain! No mention of the 30% of the English who have a distinctly working class notion of interaction, who don't get offended at being asked their name and who say what they think and feel without too much reserve. This book is just annoying and appears as if written by someone who's never really interacted with the less privileged and more worldly English. This is an image of an England, I only remember from TV sitcoms in 1970's. Not relevant anymore in modern Britain.

Sarah says

I found this fascinating. Full disclaimer -- though I think I pretty much read the whole thing, I absolutely did not read it in the order that it is written, but rather in chunks over a few days. As someone who grew up raised in Canada by English parents, with regular-ish trips to the UK to visit family, I found this indispensable. It explained and put words to so much that I have observed and felt over my lifetime. It also helped me to understand the madness that is the English class system much better than I ever had before. I knew that it existed, but I realize now that I really didn't grasp the extent of it at ALL, because it makes little sense to anyone who wasn't raised in the UK. This book also helped me to understand a little better why American (and often Canadian) habits and manners are so often excruciating to the English, and helped me to realize how many faux pas I've made over the years! Ha! My parents taught me decent table manners (upper-middle manners, I'd say), but they neglected to pass along a lot of other pieces of information. Not that I really care to follow all the rules... but it's good to at least know that i'm breaking them. I also finally understood some things about myself that always made me feel like a bit of an oddball in Canada. Turns out that I was just being English all along...

I'm fascinated by this stuff and have spent a lot of time reflecting on how being raised (sort of) English has shaped who I am. So, not everyone will likely be as into this book as I was. But if you have close friends who are English, or you're in a relationship with a Brit, or you've spent some time in the UK and have been puzzled, then you may love it too!

Caroline says

I think this would be an excellent book for any foreigners coming to live or work in England, (even Americans, who might think we share a similar culture).

The author's introduction sets the stage well, describing her aims and methodology, and her final chapter is a thorough synopsis of the ideas she expands upon in the book. I think one definitely needs to read the whole thing though. It offers the reader a chance to really wallow in our ways of living, and ways of presenting ourselves to the world.

Gauche, snobbish, polite and hypocritical.... private, self-deprecating and humorous..... DIY, gardening and animal crazy - Kate Fox prizes open our tightly clamped shells and exposes our habits and eccentricities to the light of the anthropologist's gaze.

I skim read a bit in parts – mainly because I was so familiar with the idiosyncrasies and ‘ways of being’ that she describes. I also laughed on several occasions.....we have some really ridiculous foibles, and the author describes them well.

Herewith a few tasters for anyone interested, mostly just taken straight from the book. (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Hannah says

Very entertaining book!

Now I understand why I'm such an anglophile; I'm a quirky English soul stuck in an American body! If I ever get across the pond, I think I'll fit in better then not.

Would love to read a similar book on other nationalities:

Dissecting the Danish?

Judging the Japanese?

Analysing the Australians?

Surveying the Swedish?

:D

Sarah Clement says

I am the type of person that likes to learn everything about whatever new endeavour I've taken up, so the intended purpose of reading this book was to learn more about my new country. Although the book had its moments - discussions of queuing, pub etiquette, social dis-ease food, and the weather were among the highlights - I found the obsession with class deeply off-putting. Fox is clearly from the upper-middle or upper class, and most of her discussions of 'distinctive' English characteristics are broken down by class. She tries to play the role of participant and objective observer, but clearly shows her own biases across the book (and a disdain for the working classes). Honestly...if English people pay as much attention to class as she says they do (still), then I find it incredibly depressing. I've walked away from this book feeling very fortunate that I've never given a thought to my class, and frustrated that this sort of nonsense lives on.

While the book is over 400 pages of an anthropologists observations on Englishness, and begins with a rather good discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of participant observation, I am highly skeptical of most of Fox's conclusions. There are many problems, but the chief one is that you cannot define what it is that makes the English *distinct* without comparing it to other cultures. She makes a half-hearted attempt in some places, but mainly she just resorts to the lazy approach of comparing the English to Americans. Most of what she said about American culture didn't ring true to me either, and I am not sure how living there for 4 years as a child can make her an expert. Surely there was more scientific research she could have used to really tease out what characteristics were just human or maybe just Western - and which were truly, quintessentially English. The other problem is that she simply tries to cover too much, without any evidence to back it up. There's little information on her methods, other than the introduction on participant observation, and very few references. It's hard to believe this is anything more than a summation of her view

of the country in which she's grown up. Sure she's commissioned to do this sort of research, but would it be so difficult to give a bit more information about how you know your observations are accurate, reliable, and - perhaps most importantly - meaningful?

I would like to throw a tea party for Fox, complete with coasters, napkin rings, and chip butties...just so she can judge me and tell me what my class is. As for the rest of her countrymen and women, I suspect they are not nearly as class-obsessed as she is, and I've walked away still feeling like she got lost in the 'ethnographic dazzle' (her own term) of class distinctions, while failing to capture what it really means to be English. I felt *Notes from a Small Island* did a much better job than this book, and I would much sooner recommend that, which has no illusions of being an academic study of the English yet more successfully summarises the essence of Englishness.

I'd also have liked an exploration of regional differences. Her observations seem to be squarely centred on the south (with a few snobbish references to the North). Working class northerners are a friendly bunch, and not nearly as socially awkward as the portrait of the English she paints.

Simon says

This started well enough, with some amusing and perceptive points about how the English greet each other (or rather, don't) and converse. But it soon falls into the typical trap for this kind of book, and one which Fox herself warns against in her own introduction: generalisations. Time after time she'd assert that English people do X, to which I'd reply in my head "Well, no, I don't".

She's also obsessed with class. She claims that all the English are, but she seems to think about it an awful lot more than I ever did. I skimmed whole chunks of the chapters on houses and cars because, rather than analyse what we do with them and why, she's content to produce long lists of terms, products and brand names and then assign them to particular classes. I couldn't really care less whether she considers a certain model of car to be lower class, lower-middle, middle-middle- upper-middle or upper class.

Things pick up again towards the end: the chapter on religion is very funny, and her final diagram of English defining characteristics, while reductive, is fairly accurate. I just wish she'd edited a bit more and dropped the faux-matey tone.

Anna says

I have a confession to make - am an anglophile, and on top of that, an anthropologist at heart, so I could have given this book five stars only for the title...But it has so much more to offer than the title.

The author, Kate Fox, started her professional training earlier than most. In her own words:

'My father - Robin Fox, a much more eminent anthropologist - had been training me for this role since I was a baby (...). I was only five, but he generously overlooked this slight handicap: I might be somewhat shorter than his other students, but that shouldn't prevent me from grasping the basic principle of ethnographic research methodology. Among the most important of these, I learned, was the search for rules. When we arrived in any unfamiliar culture, I was to look for regularities and consistent patterns in the natives' behaviour, and try to work out the hidden rules - the conventions or collective understandings - governing these behaviour patterns.'

Once grown up and anthropologist herself, she chose to observe her own culture, rather than foreign and far-away tribes in the amazon jungle. After a number of research project investigating behaviours in pubs, horse races and clubs, full of disorder, violence and aggression, she decided to turn to good and positive behaviors instead. Her aim in 'Watching the English' was to provide a 'grammar' of English behavior and write a book for a so called 'intelligent layman'.

Since as I already confessed, I am only a wannabe in both fields, I cannot judge if her observations were well executed and conclusions correct, I cannot judge her objectivity either. I can only express my enjoyment and my absolute delight with this book.

The unwritten rules are everywhere and through Kate Fox's mercilessly humorous eye we receive an analysis of rules of how to talk, what to talk about, what words to use, how to behave at home, at work, on public transport, how to interact, what to wear and how to wear it, how the rules differ among the different social classes and not the least, the role of irony and how important it is to never lose your sense of humor.

I learned a lot and I laughed a lot and I wish I knew all that when I actually lived in England.

Perhaps an unintended side effect is that she has produced the best possible 'manual' for anyone who would like to take a scientific approach to passing for being English :-)

So I would like to highly recommend it, if you are anglophile, if you are English, or if you are not, but would like some help with passing for one.....

Adina says

Read it around 10 years ago after my first visit to UK. Maybe I should read it again and try to find an explanation for what happened last week.

Kelly V says

I really loved this book. First of all, it's hilarious--not because she's writing humor, but simply because it turns out that it is surprising and amusing to have basic human behaviors picked apart. Second, she is very accurate and the information could actually be useful in future interactions with English people. I feel that Fox is very skilled as an anthropologist to have been able to identify these traits in any culture, much less in her own culture. But she still keeps the book's style very casual so it is quite readable, not academic at all. It almost feels like a conversation.

The key facets of English culture that she discusses are: social dis-ease (chronic social inhibitions/handicaps), humor reflex (there is always an undercurrent of humor), moderation reflex (avoidance of extremes, excess and intensity), hypocrisy (unconscious, collective self-deception, really), empiricist outlook (preference for the factual, concrete and common-sense), Eeyorishness (moaning and chronic pessimism, such as with the catchphrase, "Typical!" when something goes wrong), class-consciousness, a sense of fair play, courtesy and politeness, and modesty (prohibitions on boasting and rules prescribing self-deprecation). If that sounds vaguely interesting to you, check it out.

Jasmine says

I read this book because an english person came into the store and bought it, and I figured, I wouldn't buy a book like this on america so it must be good. Now it certainly didn't hurt that John is also English and that Barsby yelled at me for commenting that he sounds like Ringo star (I hold fast he does, this is not a british thing on the basis that I do not think any other people sound particularly like Ringo star, only Barsby). Moving on, basically I read this book and I was vindicated, the book is hilarious, the author spends a good deal of time making fun of bill bryson, which I'm sure he would appreciate and just generally making fun of British people while still managing to sound pompous when discussing how the colonies do it. I thought the depiction of America was commonly very flawed, but it was a small part of the book a contrast not a topic and she has not spent nearly as much time studying it, although her sister is "American" so I forgive her. Just as Bryson cannot get inside the British mind she seems inherently unable to get inside the American mind.

Things I have learned from this book:

British teenage girls are much better (or worse depending who you ask) at losing their virginity than Americans.

England has the highest teen pregnancy rate in Europe.

"come off it"

Growing up in rural New England is a bit like growing up in england sans the class structure and possibly with a slightly less developed sense of humor.

English people are always lying liars.

Upper class english people eat peas in the most inefficient manner possible. honestly chopsticks would be easier.

English men think being born male is a possible sign of homosexuality (okay that is an exaggeration, but basically the only things that appear not to be signs of homosexuality are buying rounds and swearing).

British people do not tend to watch too much TV.

British people like the internet because it allows them to interact with people without interacting with people.

Things not included in this book that perhaps should be:

the british women's obsession with Bingo.

Why it is insulting to be compared to Ringo star.

Pop Idol.

Pop culture generally (sub cultures were included but not mainstream except to say people avoid it. they can't all be avoiding it)

why upper class children have stupid names. Some of the names are included but no explanation of why a parent would name a child Saskia.

all in all worth a sit down.

Jan-Maat says

Anthropology practised on the English. The author claims that this was to just avoid the discomfort involved in studying peoples in obscure and isolated parts of the world - but she also tells us that humour is the default mode of the English and that modesty is one of our values. Having put us at our easy with a friendly joke and a humility *topos* she is able to smuggle her research past the reader and show us just how alien the English are. Which is a nice way of demonstrating the value of her work.

I had flicked through the book in the past. You see a brief mention of class, read it, sniff haughtily and say to your self - I could have told you that. However reading from cover to cover, starting with Fox's core idea of English social unease (or dis-ease as she calls it throughout) is a different matter and she builds up a solid case.

I would have liked to have seen more on the differences between different regions - or to have my belief that regionalism is significant disproved. A nod to how far her argument could or could not be extended to the Scots, Welsh and Irish would also have been interesting. But on the whole I'm taken with her notion of reserve as the flip side of loutishness and both as symptomatic of social uneasiness.

There's a lot here to make it a worth while read for the non-English obliged to live in England or work with the English, and there's a lot to be said for being able "To see oursels as ithers see us!"

Rebecca says

At its worst, anthropology can be extremely condescending, analyzing other cultures as if they were animals. But at its best, the discipline explains the very meaning of what it is to be human and live in human society. Fox neatly sidesteps the first to embrace the second by turning her trained gaze on her own culture.

And so we get an examination of why one doesn't speak to fellow commuters, the English substitution of home pride for social skills, the liminality of the pub, and pea-eating's role as a shibboleth. She narrows down on the English view of the world, an attitude that assumes everything will turn out poorly but one mustn't complain, in which humor and not appearing to take anything too seriously are of paramount importance. And because she herself is English and cannot help herself, she writes the entire thing with a self-deprecating wit that is delightful.

Some of her insights have helped me finally figure out some puzzling interactions I've had with British coworkers. Others merely articulate things that I myself do without quite thinking about it. As has been noted

by others, New Yorkers and the English (and the Japanese) share the concept of negative politeness--that pretending you're alone on the subway car and not meeting the eyes of fellow pedestrians is not an indication of rudeness or aloofness, but an entirely different set of manners created by people who live on a very crowded island, so that they can handle being surrounded by people all the time without flipping out and killing them all. The Midwesterner who tries to strike up a conversation with strangers on the subway is being actively rude in the environment. (One should not hold that against them, anymore than one should take seriously an inadvertently crude hand gesture made by a foreigner where it's obvious that no harm was meant, but it's still rude. Hopefully, the New Yorker accosted with inappropriate friendliness and the Brazilian who's just had an American make an OK sign will be tolerant and confine themselves to a private eyeroll.)

There are breakdowns of the class meanings of what time someone eats dinner, what they call a meal in the later part of the day that has tea involved, and what specific departments someone buys things from in Marks & Spencer. Given that American culture has some parallels but fewer strong definitions for class, it's a fascinating comparison.

In the end, she is able to codify English behavior, but not explain it. I wish she had been a bit braver--I think that England's history as having been repeatedly invaded, having several layers of class composed of foreigners, being considered a cultural backwater for quite some time before suddenly finding themselves in command of the world stage only to lose it once more, and the aforementioned fact of being a small, crowded island does much to explain some of the national character traits. Unfortunately, only the last is discussed. Nevertheless, it's a deeply insightful book that sheds a lot of light not only on the English, but also by comparison on some of their cousins.

Dimitri says

A charming yet misfigured look at English social codes.

The peculiarities of English behaviour are so greatly extrapolated that the other side of the Channel sounds almost like a different planet. In practice, a basically well-mannered & polite foreigner with an erudite dash of Anglophilia feels welcome.

Some sections are hard to follow unless you are English. Many habits come off as small town/suburb ideals that don't hold up in the inner big city. And just as many are unfortunate reminders of a still very class-based society, more so than the mainland.

Kirsty says

I feel I have something of a love-hate relationship with this book. It's clever, insightful and funny, and yet I couldn't help feeling frustrated the further into the book I got. At one point, Kate Fox mentions that she's never criticised for being overly negative, only for being deemed to be too complimentary to the English. However, in an obvious attempt to avoid being 'too complimentary', it seems she's gone too far in the other direction. I feel she's excessively critical of the English, referring to what she calls our "social dis-ease" as a "condition" that "infects" various parts of our lives, and over the course of the book, this negativity began to seriously grate on my nerves. She also refers to this 'dis-ease' as an inability to be like normal people, with

her barometer of normality being Romance language countries such as France, Spain and Italy. What about the rest of the world? The author frequently makes sweeping generalisations, apparently basing these on research predominantly in the south of England and involving small groups of participants. Many of her observations seem inaccurate or out-dated, and the author's class snobbishness also became rather irritating over time. All in all, there are some positives to this book but they're outweighed by a rather lopsided view of England and English society.
