

the leisure manager's library

An occasional series offering a guide to leisure-related literature

No 1: Netherland by Joseph O'Neill

What's it about?

Hans van den Broek lives in New York and works for an international investment bank. After the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers his wife moves back to London with their young son in pursuit of safety. Left to his own devices, Hans immerses himself in cricket, a game he learned growing up in the comfortable suburban greenery of The Hague. The bumpy pitches of Staten Island provide him with a new perspective on the game, the city of New York and the people who inhabit both.

What's it got to do with leisure?

Cricket is our link to the leisure sector. As one of the characters notes at the outset, "cricket, more than any other sport, is a lesson in civility" but it is clear that the game is played differently in New York City. There are interesting insights into "the seriousness and organisation that characterises all of Dutch sport" but here the cricketers are all outcasts, adrift from their homes, their cultures and what passes for conventional sporting pursuits in America. While Hans finds a renewed purpose and some sort of uncomfortable camaraderie with his new teammates, he also comes to realise that the people and the places are very different from the game he grew up with but so is he.

Why should I read it?

Neither the title nor the cover (in the early editions) suggests that this is a book about cricket. The author uses cricket to open characters and places but it is a book as much about margins and attitudes as the game itself. Set in a post-9/11 New York, Netherland is about a new world in the New World. Wealthy enough to flip between New York and London, Hans and his wife are still outsiders, as are Hans's fellow cricketers, all of whom come from the various outreaches of the cricketing world brought together by a game that is itself outside the understanding and acceptance of their adopted home. That Hans is Dutch serves to remind us of New York's origins as a colony (a new Amsterdam before it became a New York) but his immigrant status makes him consider what it means to be an American, what it means to be a New Yorker and what it means to be permanently detached. Too European to be a New Yorker and too Dutch to be a Londoner, Hans is separated throughout the book, from his family, from home and from the familiar.

By profession and by nature Hans is an analyst. This is his story as he tells it but his understanding of people and circumstances is not always as skilled as his financial assessments. As much as Netherland is about place (it's there in the title) it is also about perspective and perception. Hans's style of play – a batsman both steadfast and correct – is a demonstration of that voice made physical, a style that is only adapted after careful deliberation. The cityscapes of New York and London provide a grounding and a strong sense of place for the story and the characters. This placement is never stronger than when we are moving through the corridors of the Chelsea Hotel but ultimately Netherland is a book about people who are working out what it takes to make a life as a stranger in strange times and a strange place.



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