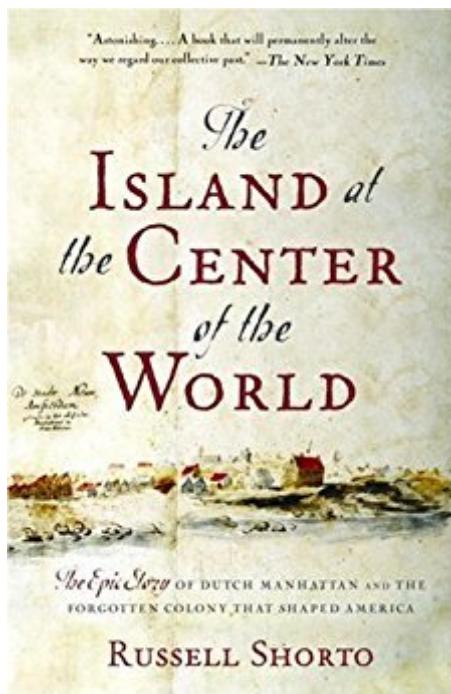


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The Island At The Center Of The World



Synopsis

When the British wrested New Amsterdam from the Dutch in 1664, the truth about its thriving, polyglot society began to disappear into myths about an island purchased for 24 dollars and a cartoonish peg-legged governor. But the story of the Dutch colony of New Netherland was merely lost, not destroyed: 12,000 pages of its records—“recently declared a national treasure”—are now being translated. Drawing on this remarkable archive, Russell Shorto has created a gripping narrative—a story of global sweep centered on a wilderness called Manhattan—that transforms our understanding of early America. The Dutch colony pre-dated the original thirteen colonies, yet it seems strikingly familiar. Its capital was cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic, and its citizens valued free trade, individual rights, and religious freedom. Their champion was a progressive, young lawyer named Adriaen van der Donck, who emerges in these pages as a forgotten American patriot and whose political vision brought him into conflict with Peter Stuyvesant, the autocratic director of the Dutch colony. The struggle between these two strong-willed men laid the foundation for New York City and helped shape American culture. *The Island at the Center of the World* uncovers a lost world and offers a surprising new perspective on our own.

BONUS MATERIAL: This ebook edition includes an excerpt from Russell Shorto's *Amsterdam*.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Russell Shorto's *The Island at the Center of the World* is a chronicle of the early years of Manhattan, when it was known as New Amsterdam and was a relatively short-lived Dutch colony. According to Shorto, this period in New York history has not only been given short shift by historians, but also is crucial to understanding the development and character of New York City and the United States. Shorto believes that most students of United States history have assumed that New York City's history only really got underway when the English took over and instilled some order. This is due in part to the disdain that the British held for the Dutch, and to the fact that the subsequent histories of the United States were told from their biased perspective. However, Shorto demonstrates that New Amsterdam was a viable society of its own, and that its unique character among the early American colonies had a remarkable impact on the future United States. For Shorto, as the first "multi-ethnic, upwardly mobile society on America's shores ... Manhattan is where America began." Shorto is not a professional historian, but rather a professional writer, and he is writing for a popular audience. As a result his work flows in a novelistic manner, with vivid descriptions, imaginative poetic license, interesting asides, informal language and even bawdy humor used to liven things up. His acknowledged inspiration is the late Barbara Tuchman, whose meticulously researched books set a standard for bridging the gap between dense scholarship and popular appeal. Indeed, she managed to make a bestseller out of a 800+ page book about the 14th century, among other subjects, and Shorto emulates her with a knack for a compelling narrative drawn from myriad primary sources.

The Island at the Center of the World is a worthy if flawed read. Two aspects in particular may annoy a reader--Shorto's use of imagined scenes and his stretching to make a point of the influence of Dutch New Amsterdam. I have to admit, the imagined scenes grated a bit on me throughout the book. They come far too frequently and lasted too long for my own liking. Too many passages began with "we might imagine", or "perhaps he . . .", or "it isn't hard to picture . . ." A few selected scenes like these could have been effective but used as frequently as they were they seemed to mar the book rather than improve it. This is more stylistic than substantive and while some readers may find it as grating as I did, others may enjoy the vivid intimacy of them. The other major flaw is Shorto's penchant to reach a bit to make his point that New Amsterdam had far-reaching influence

on the America we have today. Any writer, of course, is going to push his/her thesis; the question is how far they strain the reader's credulity in doing so. The story of the Dutch colony at New Amsterdam is interesting enough in its own right, and its influence important enough in its own right that Shorto needn't have pushed and strained so much, as if to make sure the reader felt "justified" in reading the book. When he starts to talk about Cole Slaw (more than once) as an example of the Dutch influence, you know he's walked a bit over the edge. In that case, and a few others, he diminishes the colony's importance rather than highlights it. Those two flaws aside, and one can easily set them aside while reading, *Island* is an informative, entertaining read.

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