

Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour. Kate Fox. (2004). Hodder and Stoughton.

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The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour
(Including the art of verbal flea-picking)



As an American, I have always taken for granted that we have quite a bit in common with the English. We do. However, Kate Fox's *Watching the English* has made me realize that there are, in fact, numerous differences as well, some of which I had not been aware of. For instance, I had always thought that Hugh Grant in films like *Notting Hill* was just being his inimitable self when, on being introduced or introducing himself, he would stutter and stammer, not quite getting out what he wanted to say, and embarrassed for no apparent reason. After reading Fox's book, I now know that he was simply being English!

Then there is my dear colleague Peter James. Last summer term we went to a lecture by Matthew Rooney, the American consul from Munich. Afterwards I suggested that we go up and introduce ourselves. Peter looked at me – eyebrow raised – in astonishment (or was it disdain?) and said, “Oh no, you go right ahead. I've got to get back to the office.” Strange, I thought, but once again I now know that his reaction was typically English! The English, according to Fox, simply do not run up to people they don't know and introduce themselves and — God forbid! — say what their job is. Americans do! It's perfectly normal behaviour with us, but with the English, they do not say outright what their name is, not to mention coming out with what they do! What's more, they often play guessing games about their occupations by dropping hints throughout a conversation! By the end of an evening, for instance, one is supposed to have figured out what a person who one has just become acquainted with does.

I am now enlightened on a number of aspects of English behaviour. Fox covers a whole array of topics under the headings of “Conversation Codes” and “Behaviour Codes”. She starts off her discussion with “The Weather”, which is, in fact, the ideal topic in England for starting up any conversation, and ends her discussion with “Rules of Sex” and “Rites of Passage”. The whys and wherefores are explained in great detail. The weather, greetings, and introductions, for example, are all a part of grooming-talk, which Fox defines as “...the verbal equivalent of picking fleas off each other or mutual back-scratching”, an activity that goes back to our primate ancestors. “Most of the much-vaunted human capacity for complex language is in fact devoted to such talk... .” Darwin's evolutionary heart would certainly jump for joy at this notion if he were still around!

At the very beginning of the book – even before the topic of weather is broached, the author defines terms like “rules”, “culture”, “Englishness”, “Britishness”; she explains her approach and informs the reader about her background as an anthropologist. She virtually does her own fieldwork, returning home after a hard day's work with ears burning from all

the eavesdropping and elbows bruised from all the bumping into people to test reactions. Fox evidently has anthropology in her blood. She grew up with it; her father was an anthropologist and even wanted to buy a baby chimpanzee when she was born so that he could bring them up together as a case study comparing primate and human development. Her mother vetoed the idea vehemently—which was most likely a godsend for the development of Fox's grooming-talk!

Besides being very informative, the book is delightfully entertaining and fun to read. Kate Fox is an acute observer; she captures the reader from the very start and makes the reader reflect throughout on his or her own behaviour. There are, however, some English people who do in fact question several of Fox's observations. One English colleague of mine said that she did not always agree with the author – and that “not all English people are as clumsy and awkward with introductions as Fox claims!” I too wonder just how representative some of her findings are. After all, how much bumping and listening can a set of elbows and ears take?! However, the book is certainly one of the best of its kind on the market – and I would heartily recommend it to anyone who is planning to spend time in England. It gives the reader a good idea of what one might encounter there in the way of behaviour— and it might even be an incentive to “brush” up on one's grooming-talk!