

Woit does not, that string theory from the outset possessed serious deficiencies in its ability to address certain crucial issues.

Advocates of string theory have always touted, as one of its chief virtues, its prediction of the existence of a particle known as the graviton, which had been hypothesized earlier as a key element in efforts aiming to unite general relativity, Albert Einstein's theory of gravity, with quantum mechanics. But as Smolin makes clear, a genuine theory of everything must do more than merely possess a graviton. The most profoundly new aspect of general relativity was the way it transformed space-time into a dynamic quantity. That is, the presence of mass causes space-time to become curved, and as matter moves around, the shape of space-time changes in response. String theory captures none of this. It exists in a static geometry only, and no one has any idea, Smolin says, whether it can be adapted to live in space-times that shift and flow as Einstein requires.

The problem with string mania, Smolin concludes, is that it suits the wrong kind of mentality. He makes a nice distinction between scientific seers—people such as Einstein and Niels Bohr, his heroes, who deeply pondered the working of nature and were by no means brilliant mathematicians—and craftspeople, who are

enormously adept at intricate calculation but don't seem to think much about the larger meaning of their ingenious manipulations. Seers are always in short supply, and the technical demands of mastering string theory are such that would-be researchers of a more philosophical stripe can rarely meet the price of entry.

Both authors plead for universities and granting agencies to consciously find room, every now and then, for the mavericks and eccentrics who might bring much-needed new ideas into the excessively closed world of theoretical physics. Fat chance, unfortunately, was my instant reaction, given the way the scientific world, like academia in general, rewards careerism more than brilliance.

On the other hand, as Smolin suggests, the true originals have always had to find their own paths. Think of Einstein, hatching his most brilliant ideas in the patent office in Bern. As for string theory, it's likely to unravel only when its practitioners begin to get bored with their lack of progress. Like the old Soviet Union, it will have to collapse from within. The publication of these two books is a hopeful sign that theoretical physics may have entered its Gorbachev era.

DAVID LINDLEY is the author, most recently, of *Degrees Kelvin: A Tale of Genius, Invention, and Tragedy* (2004), and is at work on a history of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

The Perils of Going Dutch

Reviewed by Eric Weinberger

"FIRST OF ALL YOU HAVE TO SAY THERE IS provocation, and the guilty one is the one who does the provoking. The response is to always punish the reaction, but if I react, something has happened." So said the French soccer hero Zinedine Zidane on why he head-butted an Italian opponent during the World Cup final, offering an apology that expressed no regret for his action, which he saw as the defense of his honor against the Italian's insults.

It would surely pain the carefully apolitical Zidane, a non-practicing Muslim born to Algerian immigrants, to be drawn into the aftermath of the 2004 murder, in Amsterdam, of the Dutch filmmaker and provocateur Theo van Gogh. But we should note the similar cause-and-effect reasoning offered by van Gogh's killer, a

MURDER IN AMSTERDAM:
The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance.

*By Ian Buruma. Penguin.
266 pages. \$24.95*

young Dutch Muslim (and son of Moroccan immigrants) named Mohammed Bouyeri. It is the calculus of an un pitying absolutist: There is provocation, demanding a crushing response.

Bouyeri killed van Gogh and drove into hiding his Somali-born collaborator, the Dutch activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for the insult they supposedly dealt to Islam in producing an 11-minute film called *Submission*. The film, which aired once on Dutch television, showed Muslim women with words from the Qu'ran projected onto their bare skin as they recalled beatings and rapes by male relatives. This was the "provocation." Language is met not with language but physical violence, the underclass signal to the rest of us that often means we have not been paying attention.

Van Gogh's murder was the most shocking event in Holland in recent years, more shocking, even, than the killing two and a half years earlier of the man who might be dubbed his predecessor in provocation, the gadfly and dandy Pim Fortuyn (about whom van Gogh made a film). Fortuyn was shot in Hilversum days before national elections that made his eponymous party one of the largest in Parliament. Fortuyn campaigned against immigration, by which he meant Muslim immigration, and his contempt for Islam was personal: As a gay man, he despised its homophobia and its efforts to undermine traditional Dutch tolerance. To much of the country's relief, it was a white animal-rights activist (though a Muslim sympathizer) who killed Fortuyn. But with the ritual murder of van Gogh—shot, stabbed, his throat cut—by a Muslim, Dutch postwar multiculturalism seemed on the brink of collapse.

Now Ian Buruma has stepped onto the scene. Many of his longtime readers will not know he is Dutch, but will associate him with Japan, China, Britain, and, more broadly, Europe and the clash of East and West—the subjects of his many noteworthy books and essays. But there is no more prominent writer in English who is also Dutch to the bone, and we are fortunate that Buruma has turned his atten-

tion to his homeland, almost as if it had become a new country after a long absence.

Murder in Amsterdam is a tabloid title, and Buruma presents himself as something of the gentleman sleuth or boulevardier moving about in Amsterdam, The Hague, and other Dutch towns, consuming many cups of tea and coffee as he carefully draws out his subjects: an excitable Iranian-Dutch law professor who, like Hirsi Ali, is sometimes called an "Enlightenment fundamentalist"; an anti-Semitic Islamic fundamentalist yet law-abiding Dutch history teacher; other Muslim immigrants and immigrant children, many of whom are well educated; and various Dutch public figures, some of whom call themselves the "Friends of Theo." It makes for



Theo van Gogh, left, directs a film about the murder of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, two months before he himself was killed by a Muslim extremist for producing the controversial film *Submission*.

suspenseful reading, and Buruma's investigations reveal van Gogh to be more complex than either caricature or his enemies would have us believe.

Buruma's book is notable for its calm narrative informed by a total immersion in Dutch language and culture. The analysis isn't as exceptional; many of the book's insights into the radicalization of Dutch Islamic youth, for instance, can also be found in public pamphlets produced by the Dutch intelligence service. Perhaps Buruma recognizes that his knowledge of Islam is limited. Instead, he elaborates an idea of

Dutchness, a cultural identity he seems to find, to some degree, in everybody he encounters: not just obvious “natives” but also the émigré Hirsi Ali and van Gogh’s Dutch-born murderer.

“Dutchness,” for Buruma, has many facets: an obsession with Holland’s moral failures during World War II (all political discussions start with or ultimately come back to the war, if only to use it as a glib analogy or invocation), sanctimonious moralism, and “a willful lack of delicacy” born of “the idea that tact is a form of hypocrisy.” And there is Dutch irony, which, as Buruma notes, can be used as “an escape from any blame” or “license for irresponsibility.” He means that you can say the most offensive things but hasten to add that you’re kidding. Van Gogh’s brand of

irony, however, seems to have been closer in spirit to that dictum famously adopted by Evelyn Waugh: “Never apologize, never explain.”

Like other Europeans, the Dutch have never made it easy for outsiders to feel at home.

Bouyeri appears to embody few of the

above traits, except perhaps the moralism, which I would argue is no longer particularly Dutch. Still, Buruma searches for his essential Dutchness, and finds it in one of Bouyeri’s Internet ravings, in which he proclaims that the “knights of Islam” will emerge from Holland’s soil. Buruma calls this a “very Dutch delusion of grandeur,” that of the Netherlands as the “world’s moral beacon.” But the national aspect of Bouyeri’s vision seems fairly unimportant, certainly to him. Rather, Bouyeri appears to have learned to stop thinking of the Netherlands altogether; his mind dwells instead in stateless, unworldly Islam.

To some of the Dutch, then, nationality is only a placeholder. A Dutch prison imam tells Buruma that “if you get rid of tradition, you still have Islam,” or, to clarify, “Culture is made by human beings. But Islam remains.” This is eerily akin to what that enemy of Islam, Hirsi Ali, says, enthusiastically, of the

Enlightenment: that it “strips away culture, and leaves only the human individual.” Hirsi Ali’s interest is the individual; Bouyeri’s, Islam. What the two share is the ease with which they dispose of the first part of each proposition: culture. On Buruma’s evidence, Hirsi Ali, for all her perfect assimilation and perfect Dutch, is hardly more involved in the Netherlands than Bouyeri.

Lucid as he is, Buruma runs up against his own Dutch wall. Evidently it is difficult for this Dutchman to imagine compatriots so uninterested in the Dutch character and its maintenance. Fortuyn as well as the “native” Dutch with whom Buruma converses express “yearnings”—a word that appears frequently—for “something that may never really have existed.” Buruma is more clear-eyed and unsentimental than they are, but at the end of the book, he departs from his customary measured tones. Pointing to the innocent Dutch habit of dressing up in the national color, orange, for soccer games, with clogs and brass bands and other gear, Buruma exclaims that this celebration of an “invented country,” like Bouyeri’s violent fantasy, contains the “seeds of destruction.” But what seeds, and what destruction? The thing about the orange men is that they are in on the joke, which, along with the carnival spirit, is as much a Dutch trait as any.

In 1975, when Buruma was leaving the Netherlands, I was a child recently arrived in The Hague, the city where he grew up and where I would too. More precisely, I grew up in the “plush extension” of Wassenaar, where Theo van Gogh, 10 years my senior, was raised two streets away, in a house that Buruma visits to chat with Theo’s parents. Buruma’s portrait of the “Wassenaar brat” who, as an adult, still came home to do his laundry hits close to home. But, if anything, I probably had more in common with the young Mohammed Bouyeri. Of course, the fate of a young man who is white and middle class, if neither truly American nor truly Dutch, is preferable to that of the dark-skinned son of a dishwasher, “neither Dutch

nor Moroccan,” as one of Bouyeri’s contemporaries described people like himself.

Like other Europeans, the Dutch have never made it easy for outsiders to feel at home. What might once have appeared, to them, anyway, to be generous—inviting huge numbers of foreign workers to a safe land where they could provide for their families—now can seem more like using, but *heedless* using. For decades, European countries carried on as if they could avoid the consequences if those workers stayed, which of course they did. Now, as French scholar Olivier Roy has noted, Islam is a Euro-

pean religion.

Theo van Gogh knew “the dangers of violent religious passions,” Buruma writes, but still acted “as though they held no consequences for him.” Yet there was charm in the way Theo spoke his obscene, unruly mind and then tottered off on his bicycle. His kind of insouciant candor is another victim of the age, and perhaps the most poignant aspect of “Dutchness” that now appears lost.

ERIC WEINBERGER teaches expository writing at Harvard University and has reviewed books for *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and other publications.

IN BRIEF

ARTS & LETTERS

A Life in Translation

MY FATHER LIKES TO TELL two stories about the writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. In the first, Singer is speaking to a group of students in New York City. Just as a shoemaker

thinks of life in terms of shoes, he says, so a writer thinks of it in terms of writing. To Singer, God was, of course, a writer. “And what is God’s book?” my father remembers Singer saying to the stunned students. “Life itself. And one thing you have to admit about God’s book. It’s *interesting*. You always want to know what happens next.”

In my father’s second story, the 65-year-old Singer is glimpsed at a Holocaust memorial service on Earth Day, in 1970. He is sitting silently in the back, listening to survivors talk. Both of my father’s versions of Singer—the man who couldn’t stop thinking about God, and the writer who remained curious all his life—emerge in journalist and *Le Monde* literary critic Florence Noiville’s lovely and often disturbing take on the life of this master of the tale.

ISAAC B. SINGER: A Life.

By Florence Noiville.
Translated by Catherine
Temerson, Farrar, Straus,
& Giroux. 192 pp. \$23

Though many Americans graduate from college without having read him, Singer (1904–91) is widely considered both a major writer of fiction and an important chronicler of European Jewish life, especially the vanished world of the shtetl, the village of the pious and usually poor. He emigrated to the United States from Poland in 1935 but persisted writing in Yiddish, even after most Yiddish speakers were killed in the Holocaust.

In America, Singer lived for years in the shadow of his older, successful-writer brother, Israel Joshua Singer, and eked out a living as a freelance journalist and contributor to the Yiddish newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward*. He didn’t publish major work until he was 40, but from then on his production was startling. In all he published 14 novels, 16 children’s books, 10 works of nonfiction, two plays, and several hundred stories. His major works include *The Family Moskat* (1950), which was his first novel published in English, as well as *The Magician of Lublin* (1960), *The Manor* (1967), *The Estate* (1969), and *Shosha* (1978). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. The film musical *Yentl* is based on one of his short stories.

As Noiville reveals in her first sentence, Singer