

NONFICTION

A fly-on-the-wall account of life on Urk

The Mystery of Urk

MATTHIAS M.R. DECLERCQ

Dissatisfied with an article about a murder on Urk he wrote as a burgeoning journalist, Matthias M.R. Declercq returns in a renewed effort to get to grips with one of the most peculiar villages in the Netherlands.

Urk is generally portrayed as a closed village community with people who are dour, distrusting and difficult to fathom. A former island, reclaimed from the sea and now part of the province of Flevoland, the town remains an island in the minds of its people – which is why we say *on* Urk, not *in* Urk. Fishermen. Everybody knows everybody else. You're born on Urk, you marry an Urker and you'll be buried in Urk soil. Rigid and taciturn. Sullen. Suspicious. Deeply religious.

For six months, Declercq lives in the most closed and orthodox fishing village in the Dutch Bible Belt, where he talks to the locals, prays with them, drinks with them, and even goes out fishing with them for a week. Little by little, the trust between them grows and a different reality comes to the fore. Declercq sees an affable and God-fearing group of people, while also becoming increasingly aware of a more shadowy world of youthful rebellion, despair, seafood fraud, xenophobia, incest, inbreeding and drug trafficking. Nothing is what it seems.

In the Belgian with the funny accent, Urk has found its own Louis Theroux who has opened up the village to the rest of the world.

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Matthias M.R. Declercq (1985) studied Politics and Social Science and currently works as a freelance journalist for the daily newspaper *De Morgen*, the weekly magazine *Humo* and the cycling magazine *Bahamontes*. He lives in Ghent, often cycles on the towpath and loves the Scheldt. *The Fall*, his debut, has already enjoyed six printings. The book received an honourable mention for the Debut Prize 2017. *Photo © Jonas Lampens*

ORIGINAL TITLE *De ontdekking van Urk* (2020, Manteau/Podium, 325 pp)

PRIZES Confituur Boekhandelprijs, De Loep, shortlisted for the Brusseprijs

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