

HOW to be
an ALIEN
in ENGLAND

A Guide to the English

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An extract from September Publishing

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First published in 2016 by September Publishing

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Typeset by Ed Pickford

Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Hussar Books

ISBN 978-1-910463-21-5

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

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HOW TO BE AN ALIEN



BEFORE I MOVED to London I never thought of myself as an alien. But, since then, being an alien has become my number one personality trait.

To help me cope with myself as an alien, my brother Attila presented me with a book, George Mikes' *How to be an Alien*. It was published in 1946, when the term 'alien' was commonly used to describe foreigners. When I look at the mirror it still seems just right.

The book was translated into 22 languages, sold in 39 countries and has now sold over 450,000 copies. It is not an exaggeration to say that it was (and still is) a worldwide bestseller. Of course the best

compliment George Mikes could get from The English was that his book was ‘not too bad’.

That George was accepted, and became a bestselling writer, gave me hope. And reading the first few pages I had the feeling that if George was still alive we would definitely be friends. Not best friends, since everyone knows that in London your best friend is your umbrella, but second-best friends. Because we have so much in common.

First of all, we are both Hungarians. George was born a mere 70 kilometres away from where I was born. (No, sorry, I have no idea how many miles that is.) We both fled from Hungary. (Okay, he fled due to political reasons while I fled from a broken heart, but still.) George planned to stay only temporarily and then move on, but he lived in England for the rest of his life, and my short stay too has already extended for a decade.

For me, this and Mikes’ other books seemed the perfect way to help me understand both myself as an alien and also The English. And it did help a lot.

However, some things have changed since 1946, and although George and I have many similarities in our lives, we have many differences too. First of all he was a man and I am a woman, and everybody



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knows that men and women see the same things quite differently, sometimes completely oppositely. Also, when George arrived to England he was already quite proficient in English while I couldn't speak a word, therefore he had a good job making documentaries for the BBC, while my first job was serving tables in a kebab shop 72 hours a week for £600 per month. So I thought that, just like he did, I shall challenge myself to examine The English and learn how not to be a too bad alien.

Why?

Because George was completely right, saying: 'The world still consists of two clearly divided groups: the English and the foreigners. One group consists of less than 50 million people; the other of 3,950 million. The latter group does not really count.'

HOW TO BE OPTIMISTIC



I WAS EXTREMELY ENTHUSIASTIC to learn optimism from The English when I moved to London.

You may ask why?

Well, because I am Hungarian.

We are said to be the most pessimistic people in Europe. Probably in the whole planet. Moon included. Hungarians always see the worst. If something is good it is suspicious for us. The common belief in Hungary is that an optimistic person is simply uninformed. Or misinformed.

Of course we agree that optimism would be a better approach to life but it is just not our thing. It has never been.

For example, have you ever heard the Hungarian national anthem? No? Good for you! I wouldn't recommend it at all. Unless you are looking for inspiration for your suicide attempt. If it is not just an attempt but you are deadly serious about your suicide then I strongly recommend you not only read the lyrics but listen to the music too. The most mournful funeral song sounds jolly compared to it.

Other nations have inspiring anthems like 'God Save the Queen' or 'La Marseillaise' or 'The Star-Spangled Banner', and their lyrics are about victory and proudness like 'Russia – our sacred homeland, Russia – our beloved country' or 'Germany, Germany above everything, Above everything in the world!'

But what about the Hungarian anthem?

It starts with 'O Lord, bless the Hungarian' and then follow eight long and painful stanzas about our 'slave yoke' and 'funeral urn' and 'the corpses of our defeated army' and 'groans of death, weeping' and finally it finishes with 'Pity, O Lord, the Hungarians they who have suffered for all sins of the past and of the future!'

Yes, of the future too.

It doesn't sound optimistic, does it?

Plus to multiply our pessimism we have a tradition that on New Year's Eve at midnight every single Hungarian in the whole world stands up and sings our happy-go-lucky national anthem.

Perfect start for a new year, isn't it?

There are those lunatic people who always prophesy the end of the world. I belong to them. I strongly believe that the end of the world will come as a worldwide mass suicide when one day Hungary wins all the Olympic gold medals and the whole world is constantly forced to listen to our national anthem. Don't laugh! There is a fair chance of that since we are amongst the top countries of the Olympic medal table. If you consider the population of the other countries, actually we are second after Finland. So, as you can see, I am not kidding.

Now I am sure you understand why I wanted to learn optimism from The English. They seemed like the perfect nation to teach me how to 'always look on the bright side of life'.

I needed optimism. A lot.

But soon I realised that The English are not entirely optimistic. But I wouldn't say that they are pessimistic either.

So what are they?

To be honest even a decade in England is not enough for me to find the right word to describe their temperament, so I have had no other option but to invent a new expression myself, to contribute to the English language.

In my opinion The English are 'borderline pessimistic'.

For evidence of my borderline pessimist theory there is only one word you have to understand. This word is the English favourite national catchphrase, namely: 'typical'.

Let's say it rains all bank holiday weekend. Are The English surprised or sad or angry?

Not at all. Because this is what they have expected and this is what happened.

They only sigh philosophically, with a look of a prophet who is prideful that his (in this case: negative) prognostication has happened, and they say: 'Typical.' (With a dot and not with an exclamation mark.)

In England everything is typical. If your train is late, it is typical. If there are no seats on the upper deck of a bus, it is typical. If the printer breaks down at your workplace just before you want to

use it, it is typical. If it starts to rain at five o'clock just before you leave work, it is typical. If you pay £4 for a £3 meal deal, it is typical. If there are severe delays on the tube because of suicide, it is typical. If your meal is late, cold or uneatable in a restaurant, it is typical. If your queue is the slowest queue, it is typical. If you wake up at the weekend because of the noise of your neighbour's lawnmower, it is typical. For The English everything is typical. And not just small everyday things but big things too. One of my English friends said that the American Revolution was so typical of the bloody Americans. (Sorry, Americans, but you must know the truth: The English call you 'bloody' too; in their eyes you are no better than any other alien nation.) When I asked my friend how it could be typical if it was the first and last and *only* War of American Independence, he looked at me as puzzled as if I was an alien from a faraway unknown planet. (Or at least from Hungary.) And after his long, puzzled pause he did not answer, of course. Which was so typical of The English! (Typical *with* exclamation mark!)

For me the constant use of the word 'typical' sounds more pessimistic than optimistic. It is like

always seeing the worst. With not as much pessimism as Hungarians, but definitely borderline pessimistic.

But there is nothing wrong with pessimism. The world needs pessimism too. There is a well-known aphorism by G.B. Stern: 'Both optimists and pessimists contribute to our society. The optimist invents the airplane and the pessimist the parachute.'

Have you ever heard the story of Robert Cocking?

He was an English parachute designer and developer. (For your information: the modern parachute was invented by a Frenchman. I am just adding it to please French readers and give them a chance to look down upon The English more than they already do.)

Despite being a parachute developer, the English Robert Cocking was not a pessimist at all. He was an optimist. He was certain that his new parachute design would work. So believed the large audience in Vauxhall Gardens.

But sadly, his parachute did not work.

Do you think it was typical?