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Beyond Chocolate: Understanding Swiss Culture



Synopsis

Immerse yourself in the cultural attitudes of Switzerland's fascinating, multifaceted society. This study exposes different attitudes and potential misunderstandings about friendship, neighbourliness, being professional, giving and getting compliments and criticism, parenting, schooling, being polite, entertaining, decision making, etiquette, leadership, making plans and much much more.

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Customer Reviews

When learning about another culture, insight and reassurance are often best conveyed by telling stories. Beyond Chocolate is essentially a book of highly instructive stories about living and working in Switzerland. The focus of the book is upon the German Swiss culture with occasional deviations into the French and Italian areas of the country where differences there merit attention. Oertig-Davidson quickly demonstrates that she is both professional as an interculturalist and experienced in the ways of Swiss society. She does not omit some familiar intercultural boilerplate such as the metaphor of 'peach and coconut' types of cultures and Hofstede's four models of company culture in her interpretations of

cultural interactions. Yet, it is clear that the active ingredients in her recipe are the stories that echo the flavors of the culture as tasted by the many expats and Swiss who recounted their experiences with each other. One of the advantages of the testimonial approach is that the reader sees how values are created and experienced. Early on one has the fleeting sense that the book is mostly for expats concerned about family life, child rearing and the neighborhood expats will live in. Though the author suggests that some people might want to simply "dip into the business section," I think that this would be a mistake. While there might be momentary merit in getting some quick clues about Swiss behavior, the earlier sections on family, upbringing and education actually create mental matrix necessary to interpret behavior and respond appropriately in business situations. When discussing how people "learn the rules of social interaction, for example, Oertig-Davidson researched the distinction made between the Swiss concept of "Anstand" a basic code of behaviour, based on the unwritten rules of society; and "Politeness" a nice to have, but not necessary. Anstand is when an elderly person drops some thing and a younger person picks it up. Politeness is when a younger person drops something on the floor and an elderly person picks it up. Rarely does an expat benefit from such a distinction in a new culture and we may, to our peril, miss basic behavioral codes, thinking them optional. Again the Beyond Chocolate backs the theoretical distinction with copious stories to help us understand its application. Given the author's Herkunft as an English teacher and her experiences training for communication, the book is particularly rich in cultural insights and examples that language itself provides. She exposes the clues to the cultural realities contained in words, expressions and modes of interaction. Chapter two contains a deceptively simple and thus brilliant section on involvement and independence. I wish that I had known years ago that my cultural assumption that "chatting up others and treating strangers intimately was something peculiar to my own culture and not necessarily appreciated everywhere, and, may even be seen as highly unprofessional. "Swiss," she observes, "may not see the point in finding something in common with people they meet in passing and will never see again. (They also do not feel the need to know the first names of staff)." Similarly she observes how the Swiss German preference for the present tense to express the "future as fact" is not just a linguistic peculiarity but part of a paradigm for thinking and working that provides a certain confidence in the procedures one uses to get things done. A welcome feature of the book for business readers is the

author's preparedness to occasionally comment on the practices and effects of virtual working. Since in many organizations today 80% or more of communication takes place via virtual media, being able to discuss the effects of these media on cultural patterns of communication is becoming a hallmark of an interculturalist's relevance and credibility. Likewise, Oertig-Davidson does not make the common error of seeing culture as a museum but is also careful to point out current cultural shifts that seem to be underway in numerous aspects of thinking and behavior. Just as California roll is a common menu item in Tokyo sushi restaurants, global business in Switzerland is bringing about "fusion cooking" in many aspects of work and social life. Perhaps as a result of working too often in Bruxelles, chocolate was not the first thing on my mind when seeing the title of this book about the Swiss. I think about banks. For me, the book, gem that it is, didn't speak to my curiosity about two important issues. First, I would like to know more about how the Swiss think, feel and speak about specific crises vis-à-vis the EU and their shifting role in the world. This would include reactions to the financial issues coming to light about historical collaboration with National Socialism and current issues of banking secrecy. Secondly, I would like to hear more about the state of the many immigrant workers in Switzerland and the socio-cultural issues that they face and that others face in interacting with them. Obviously, one book cannot do everything, so I hope that this is not a manifestation of national denial about these issues, and that there is more to come.

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