Dutch Color

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For my sisters,
BERTA and LUCY.
Thanks for all the childhood
torture and laughter,
especially the laughter.

Other children's books by Douglas Jones:

Huguenot Garden

Huguenot Garden is a children's story of the daily adventurous episodes in the lives of Renée and Albret Martineau, young twin sisters in a seventeenth-century, French Protestant family.

The episodes follow the twins and the rest of the Martineau family as they work, worship, commune, and suffer persecution together.

The story portrays the ideas and historical details common to Huguenot life in La Rochelle, France, 1685, a tragic year whose final quarter brought the full wrath of Louis XIV.

Scottish Seas

Scottish Seas follows the fears and triumphs of Mac Ayton, a young Scottish farmboy in 1707, striving to grow strong amid clashes with the sea, banditry, myths, animals, and brothers.

Set in and around the colorful fishing village of Auchmithie located on the rugged east coast of Scotland, Mac and the rest of his family live a life full of laughter, faith, and wrestling.

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CHAPTER 1

Beach Flop

It's not this one. No. It smells too much like fish," Clara said. Her fingers thoughtlessly toyed with the fabric of her brother's sleeve.

Their Uncle Caspar stared out over the harbor from under the broad brim of his dark hat, but Uncle Hendrick tilted his head and looked over his spectacles at the wooden bulk sitting in front of the four of them; it was a common Dutch *fluit* ship, newly built that year, 1629.

"Well, it is a *fishing* boat," Uncle Hendrick said. He stared at the back of Clara's head, speaking as if to a slightly mad dog. "And this *is* a harbor. Everything here is required to smell like fish. Even my new jacket *now*, thanks to you." His words poked holes through the lingering smoke of his pipe.

"Please, *please*, Uncle, don't say that word," Clara said, not taking her eyes off the boat.

"Which word?"

No answer.

He exaggerated his lips, guessing. "Fishing?" He spoke it crookedly.

"Stop it. Please stop." Clara wiggled her skinny arms and kept her attention on the sailors walking down the boat ramp onto the dock.

Uncle Hendrick raised his eyebrows to his brother Caspar. Uncle Caspar reached into his coat and pulled out an imaginary notebook. He opened it and pretended to write. His broad white collar stood stiff as he moved.

"I'm afraid, Hendrick, we have to slay yet another word. Let's see what other banned words are on the list in front of it. There's *bugle* and *moist* and *Amsterdam* and *lips* and . . ."

Clara covered her ears and tilted her head straight back in order to see him. She mouthed the words "You are cruel" and turned back to the boat.

"I want to go ask them," Clara said and grabbed her brother's hand as she started down the dock. At eight, Ernst was almost as tall as Clara was at thirteen. But Ernst wanted nothing to do with these sailors.

"No, Clara, I want to go see that whale." He peeled her grip from his hand and ran back to their two uncles. She didn't pause but kept walking right up the gangplank, her deep blue skirt swishing against the men. On the back of her head she wore a colorfully embroidered cap that fit closely to her pinned hair. Her head barely reached the sailors'

barreled chests. One sailor teased at her cap with his heavy fingers. Her blond arm snapped out and slapped at his hand.

When she reached the top, Clara cupped her hands around her mouth. "I'm looking for my father!"

"I'm looking for mine!" shouted back one sailor.

"I'm your father!" said another. Others laughed.

"We fed him to the fish," said one.

"We ate him," said another. They laughed again.

Clara put her hands on her hips. "I'm not laughing," she said.

"We are," the last sailor said.

"I'm surprised you know how to talk!" She shot off the words into the air after them.

From behind her came a slow, deep voice. "Watch your mouth, missy." The captain had just walked up. Turning, she collided with him and flinched at his bulk.

"Sorry, Captain," Clara said. Her uncles were already running up the gangplank to her, their hats removed from their heads.

"Please, excuse her, captain," said Uncle Hendrick, sort of bowing. "She's really not well. Too many strawberries, I'm afraid."

Uncle Caspar stepped in too. "She's from Utrecht. Everyone there is a little . . . you know . . ." He pulled his ear and opened his mouth wide.

They hustled her down the plank, half carrying her, half pushing; her shoes thudded on the dock a few times. Uncle Caspar whispered, "It's not good to pick fights with water gorillas."

Uncle Hendrick nodded. "Especially if you're just a ribbon of a girl." They reached the bottom. "Now, Caspar and I could flatten them all."

Caspar nodded to Hendrick. "Yes, we could indeed if we were entirely different men."

"Yes, of course, entirely different," said Hendrick.

"Wait!" she said, and she stiffened her body more. "I want to speak to the captain." She wriggled free and turned. "Captain! My father left this city . . . Amsterdam"—she cringed to say that word—"eight months ago for Venice, Italy. He's five months late. He would have been carrying color mixes as cargo. Have you seen him?"

The captain didn't look at her. "I've seen too many Dutchmen going to Italy. Every painter goes. They are a blur."

She shrugged her shoulders twice and pushed a loose strand of her hair back over her ear. She breathed heavily through her nose.

"Maybe Father is looking at that whale," said Ernst, trying to sneak that topic back to her attention. He made a weird face to make her laugh.

"Come on," he said, "we'll miss it." Clara ruffled his hair and sighed in resignation.

Far down from the dock, a crowd shouted and hooted. Some were laughing, others were making warning sounds. Ernst pulled his sister's arm. "It's the whale, I tell you. They will chop it up, and we won't have seen it."

With that thought, Ernst broke into a gallop, and Clara followed close behind, not wanting to miss any excitement. Away they went, down the dock, along the beach road. Amsterdam was made up of intricate

paths of canals, strips of land, and quay walls where ships were moored. A small tip of sandy beach jutted out from one side of the harbor.

Even though the uncles kept saying a beached whale was a bad omen, the two men slowly followed the children. As they all moved farther away from the dock, the smell of fish began to mingle more with that of fresh bread. In the distance they could see the giant crowd standing in a half-circle on the small beach. Ernst ran on ahead of his sister and uncles. He could smell the dead whale before he saw it—the smell of boiling cabbage mixed with eggs drying in sunshine. The whale had beached itself two days before, and it had long since died. Ernst had hoped to see it breathe.

When he reached the inner crowd he noticed that people kept well away from the grand pile of whale laying on its side. He pushed and squeezed between big legs to fill his eyes with whale. Ernst looked up and couldn't see over the top of the whale to the crowd on the other side. Before him was a mountain of dry gray, dotted with barnacles. Some men had tightened ropes across the whale, making it look striped. Its skinny jaw sat open at an odd angle. Several long triangles came out of its sides. Ernst didn't know what those were; maybe they were sails. The people on the outer edge spoke loudly. The people along the inner edge, closest to the whale, stood in complete silence, as if at a king's funeral. When clusters of people could no longer stand the rotting smell, they would leave the front row and move away silently through the crowd, shaking their heads and muttering about divine curses.

Ernst finally closed his mouth when his sister came up behind him. She put her hands on his head like a little cap. Clara's eyes followed the men inserting hooks into the whale and wrapping ropes around it. They were either going to turn it over or try to drag it out to sea. Several boys had also been climbing up the ropes, getting in the way. The sailors kept swishing them away, but like gnats, the boys would scatter for a moment and then return. Clara pushed Ernst's head forward.

"Why don't you go climb it?" she said.

Ernst pretended for a moment not to hear her. Then he answered, "One of the boys got stuck. His leg popped through the dry whale skin."

"I think," Clara said, "you should go to the top and give a speech."

Ernst paused. "I would, but I can't remember anything right now."

"Do your catechism," she said. He clicked his tongue.

"I was too little the last time a whale beached here," she said. "I'm not going to miss my ride this time." She vanished. A few moments later, Ernst heard shouting on the other side of the whale. He could see that someone was pulling on the ropes from the other side, and he just knew it would be his sister. He stood grinning, waiting for Clara's head to appear over the top of the whale.

Finally, there she was. Her cap had come off. She steadied herself and stood tall. The sunshine danced within the gold tangles of her hair, loosened in places.

"That's my sister," Ernst said to those around him. He waved both hands at her. She waved back and made a big "O" with her mouth. Several boys followed her up and sat around her feet.

She took a deep breath; her balance slipped a bit. She took another big breath and shouted, "Quiet, please! Quiet! I have a famous poem for this occasion:

> My brush is my sword; my broom my weapon!
> Sleep I know not, nor any repose!
> No labor is too heavy; no care too great!
> To make everything shine and spotlessly neat!
> I scrape and scour; I polish and scrub!
> And suffer no one to take my tub!"

A few people clapped. Most were watching the sailor crawling up behind her. The boys saw him and scattered, sliding down. She curtseyed to the crowd and then shouted, "I am the whale queen! Please clap your hands above your head for me, Clara Zoelen!"

A few started clapping and laughing, then more. Soon all the people in the crowd were clapping their hands above their heads. Clara smiled. "Thank you. *I am* the whale queen!"

The sailor finally reached her. He wasn't smiling. He grabbed her by the waist and flopped her over his shoulder. She didn't object. She stretched out her hands to the crowd once more and started singing "I am the whale queen!" over and over. Once the sailor and Clara reached the sand, she curtseyed to him and raced off into the crowd, sand flying behind her.

Down on the other side of the whale, Ernst looked at the people staring at him. "My sister is the whale queen," he said and went off to find her.

Clara and Ernst met at the uncles, who had waited alongside the beach road. Their backs were to the whale, just so they could be contrary. Ernst hugged his sister.

"You missed it," said Ernst. He was out of breath. "Clara climbed the whale!"

Uncle Hendrick frowned and rolled his eyes. "Yes, and tulips give milk, I suppose."

Uncle Caspar shook his head. "No one can climb a whale. It's too slippery."

"*She* did!" said Ernst. "And look. Sailors are on it." The uncles and the children turned and peered over the crowd. No one was on the whale.

"Well, they *were* on it, and so was Clara!"

The uncles turned away from the whale. "Laughter and jokes," said Uncle Caspar. "Just forget it. We just won't fall for this one. Next you'll tell us the English can cook."

Uncle Hendrick chimed in, "Or that they can paint."

"Absurd," said Uncle Caspar. Ernst started to protest again, but Clara called him off with a shrug. She knew she had been on the whale.

The uncles started walking away. "Nevertheless," said Uncle Hendrick, "now that you're both finished staring at that dead-omen thing, let's make our way back through town, shall we?"

Crossing several canals, they made their way back to the main part of Amsterdam. On either side, houses and shops towered above them, until they

came into the open area in the cathedral square. Merchants and shoppers spread out from there in all directions.

Uncle Caspar pulled out his coin purse. He put six guilders in Clara's hands. This was quite a lot of money for normal things, but not much for tulip bulbs. He nudged Uncle Hendrick in the side, encouraging him to contribute to the gift.

Uncle Hendrick shook his head. "No thank you, Caspar, I don't need any money."

Uncle Caspar nudged his arm. "I was suggesting that you chip in a coin or two. It wouldn't hurt."

"It might hurt *me*," said Uncle Hendrick. "This girl here would probably waste it on something wonderful and exquisite, like tulips." He shook his head. "I will contribute only if she agrees to buy something senseless, like a pretzel. Moderation in all things, I say—only don't be extreme in your moderation."

Clara rubbed her head on Uncle Hendrick's sleeve like a cat. "Oh, Uncle, but pretzels don't call my name when I walk by. Tulips sing for attention. When they don't get that attention they turn nasty."

"They're choir beggars; don't trust them," said Uncle Hendrick. "That's all we need back home, more lazy flowers soaking up all the attention . . . Here." He put more coins in her hand. "Just be sure to get me two yellow-lion bulbs." Clara thanked him profusely and kissed his hand. Then he added, "And do save some of that money for the canal ride back to Utrecht."

He straightened his coat. "Now which flower merchant shall we visit first?" Clara leaned over to her brother and whispered in his ear.

"Come now," Uncle Hendrick repeated, "where shall we go?"

"*We*?" Clara echoed. She and Ernst looked at each other, turned, and ran off down the street, leaving the uncles behind. Within moments, the children were out of sight, lost amid the buyers and sellers. The uncles stood there, staring down the road, then at each other.

"Hmmm. I do believe they've abandoned us all alone here in Amsterdam," said Uncle Hendrick.

Uncle Caspar puffed out his lips in thought and shook his head. "But I'm not afraid," he said quickly.

"No, no, neither am I," said Uncle Hendrick. "But shouldn't we do something parental like find them or worry a bit?"

"I suppose so, but I'm too tired to worry."

"Perhaps we should call in some mercenary soldier-types with large weapons to hunt them down and blip them on their heads," said Hendrick.

"No, the soldiers might decide to hurt us instead," said Caspar.

"Yes, indeed; we can't trust mercenaries," said Hendrick. After a moment, he said, "I have just the idea."

* * * * *

Clara and Ernst ran around a corner and leaned against a stone wall. Their chests heaved up and down in quick breaths and laughter. After a moment Ernst said they should go back, or they'd never find the uncles; Clara said they shouldn't.

"We'll find them waiting for us at the canal boats. Come, let's go exploring," said Clara.

Ernst started walking back. "I thought we were just going to run away and then go back to them. Gypsies might snatch us," he said.

"Don't be silly," said Clara. "We know our way around this city just fine. We've been here at least sixty times. And there aren't any gypsies here." She rolled her eyes.

"Then sailors might steal us off to India," Ernst said, and he stepped back, turned, and ran off the way they had come, pushed by his fear. Clara waited right there. She knew. Within moments, Ernst came running back to her. "The uncles are gone!" he called, waving his arms high; his eyes glistened a bit.

"Good," said Clara. "Now we can get some proper tulips. Hurry along. You can pretend to be my French slave. I might even buy you a pretzel."

The two of them wandered in and around the market stalls. Ernst was sure he saw gypsies. Clara quickly bought him a large pretzel. It calmed him while she talked to the tulip sellers. She was searching for some special tulip colors. And she wanted the kind that she could plant now, just before the beginning of spring, the sort that would blossom in summer. She couldn't stand waiting for them through winter. Ernst was starting to lag. Clara kept promising that she was almost finished, though she hadn't yet purchased any bulbs.

Just when she herself was starting to lag, she stumbled upon a tulip seller offering a "mystery pick" of tulip bulbs. He had filled a halved wine cask with common, unexciting bulbs, but then with much fanfare in front of the crowd he took a rare

Soomerschoon (SOE-mer-skone) tulip bulb from his top shelf and mixed it in with the common bulbs. Even common bulbs were expensive— about one guilder—which was about the price of five loaves of rye bread or ten pounds of cheese. A single Soomerschoon bulb cost about seventy guilders, or about three-hundred-and-fifty loaves of bread or seven-hundred pounds of cheese or three months wages for a bricklayer.

And yet, these weren't the most expensive bulbs. The most expensive bulbs, like the most famous of them all—the Semper Augustus—cost thousands of guilders. Every year the cost of tulip bulbs increased. Her uncles had told her that if this continued, someday a Semper Augustus would be more valuable than a house. They would be right.

To take a chance on the barrel, a chance on winning a seventy-guilder Soomerschoon, one had to pay the price of five common bulbs in order to select any three, and one might be the rare Soomerschoon bulb. In this way, the vendor could quickly get rid of his aging common bulbs.

Clara bit her lip. Even after buying the pretzel she had just enough to pay the mystery barrel price. When it came her turn, she handed over her money. The tulip seller made her turn her head away when she reached inside the barrel. She was sure she could "see" the Soomerschoon with the tips of her fingers. One. Two. Three. She pulled out her three bulbs, but they all looked the same. It was hard to tell if one was special. She plopped them into her skirt pockets and gave Ernst an evil grin. She patted her treasure, then they ran off toward the canal boats heading back to Utrecht.

The sun had hidden part of itself behind the buildings of Amsterdam, and thick cold clouds were moving overhead. The Zoelen children ran over a low, broad-arched bridge, and Clara cupped her hand over the pocket in her skirt. The canal boats left just three times a day for the seven-hour ride back to Utrecht. But other canal boats left more often. They could even ride the smaller boats to go part of the way and catch up with the larger boats if they had to. One boat was just leaving as the children ran up to the landing, but another would be boarding soon.

They waited for the uncles, but no uncles were around to be seen. They walked along the dock for a moment, when they heard their uncles' shouts. They turned and looked up the dock, the street, the canal bank but couldn't see them. The calls continued.

Ernst turned and looked at the boat which had left as they were arriving. He saw the uncles. He pulled Clara's arm and pointed. All life had left his face. The uncles were leaning on the back of the boat waving their pipes toward the children, wishing them a good trip. Eye for eye; abandonment for abandonment.

Clara yelled out, "You can't leave us. We spent all the money!"

The uncles were too far away to hear her. The children could only make out a few words through the uncle's laughter, like "you a lesson" and "use the money we gave you." The uncles were quite proud of themselves.

Ernst slumped against the railing, slowly sliding down to the wooden dock. Clara's mind was

clicking. "Come on," she said. "Let's go sell these bulbs back to a tulip merchant." They ran back to the flower market, but no seller wanted to buy her bulbs. She went to stall after stall, even to the man from whom she had purchased them. He brushed away her pleas. They headed back to the canal dock. She decided to try to beg a ride back home, promising the boat driver more money when they arrived in Utrecht.

But when they crossed the final bridge and started down the steps, Clara's throat grew dry. She could feel the beat of blood in her fingers. The cold air sneaked in next to her skin. Money would now be useless. They had been gone for over an hour, and they had missed the final boat out of Amsterdam. All the canal boats were gone, and the dock was closed. Ernst wanted to yell, but he couldn't even speak.

"You did this," he whispered and slid down again to the dock. The tears started rolling down his cheeks.

"Don't you go soft on me now," Clara said, and she tried to pull him up by his jacket. She couldn't do it. She crouched down and got in close to his face. "You stop that crying. They'll think I'm caring for a little girl." Her face was pulled tight, but she couldn't stop her silent tears. They spilled out over her anger. She stood up; Ernst kept crying aloud. She crouched down with new energy and pulled up on his collar again. She had another idea. "Say the first catechism!" she told him, close to his eyes. She shook him. He couldn't. She banged him against the railing a bit. "Say the first catechism!" She was hissing now. "Say it! 'What is your only comfort in life

and death?'" He grew quiet. She pushed him back again and lifted up his chin. "Answer me. 'What is your only comfort?'"

He spoke through his weeping. "That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who with his precious blood—"

"That's enough. Say that part again," Clara said and pushed him back. He said it again, and she made him say it a third and fourth time. He had stopped crying by then. She stood and helped him up.

Ernst looked her in the eyes. "It's a catechism, not a magic potion," he said. "Don't make me say things you won't." She brushed dirt off of him but didn't answer.

She sighed for her father. Her brother made a loop with his arm, and she slid her arm through. As they slowly walked up the steps arm in arm, they realized that the sun had left them. A dark Amsterdam awaited.