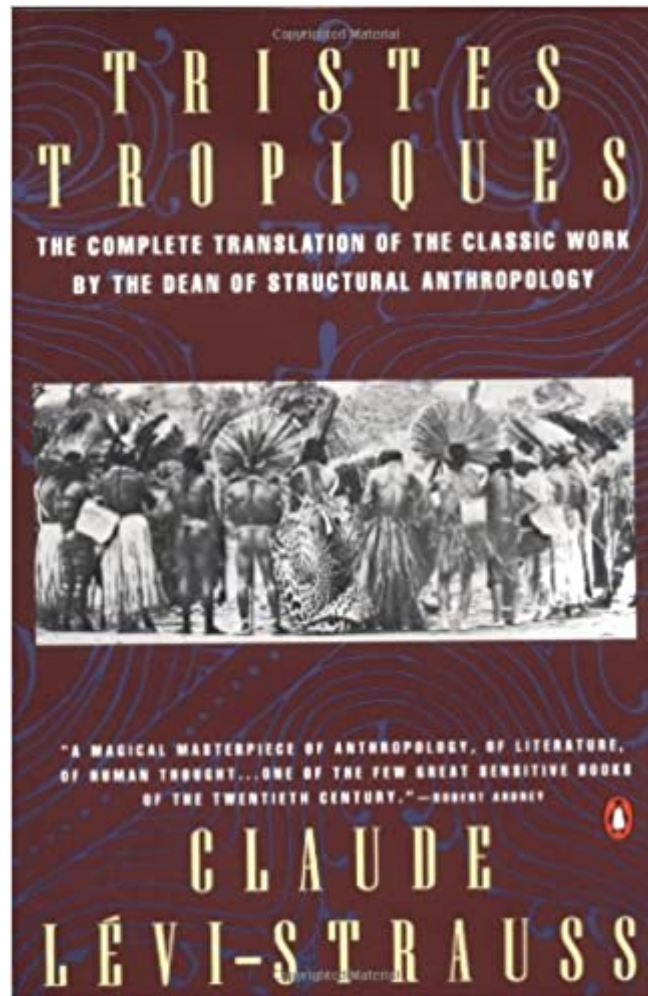




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Tristes Tropiques



Synopsis

"A magical masterpiece."—Robert Ardrey. A chronicle of the author's search for a civilization "reduced to its most basic expression."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"I hate travelling and explorers," famously declared Claude L  vi-Strauss, but how fortunate for readers that he should overcome his loathing to write about his experiences among the indigenous peoples of the Brazilian interior, including the Caduveo, Bororo, and Nambikwara tribes. Those who know L  vi-Strauss and *Tristes Tropiques* by reputation only will be pleasantly surprised by the intimate tone that colors even its most precise anthropological sections, as well as the autobiographical passages at the beginning, in which the author recounts how he fell into his career and how, shortly after the Nazis occupied Paris, he was forced to flee to America in a grueling sea voyage. Twenty-five black-and-white photographs of tribespeople, as well as numerous line drawings, accompany the text.

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French

This "collage" of material, as L  vi-Strauss himself called this work, consists, essentially, of three separate sections: 1.) The beginning of the work which brims with philosophical meditations on the current state of post-war Europe - The book was penned in 1950. - amidst various and sundry other subjects combined with splendid, lyrically descriptive passages. 2.) An account of his

fieldwork in Brazil. 3.) A rather odd, and sometimes very "triste" indeed personal reflection upon what the point of being an anthropologist is at all. The second part, whilst it comprises the greater part of the work, is of the least intrinsic interest unique to Lévi-Strauss. One could pick up a random copy of National Geographic and read much the same sort of thing. That being so, I'll concern myself with the two sections - the first and last - which raise the book above the common lot of travelogue, social commentary and random meditation. The first section is primarily, I should say, an elaboration of Lévi-Strauss's observation in the first pages that, "Mankind has opted for monoculture." In many ways, it reminds one of the wistful lamentations of Gregor Von Rezzori, in its subject matter as well as in its stylism. It is a curious mixture of autobiography and a richly worded indictment of Western society as a whole which has the consistency, unusual amongst French writers, of not sparing any amour-propre for France as an exception. The entire landscape comes alive as if in agonised death-throes, as in the following passage: "Towards evening, there was a thunderstorm and the water glistened in the distance like a beast's underbelly. At the same time, the moon was hidden by ragged patches of cloud, which the wind blew into zigzags, crosses and triangles. These weird shapes were lit up as from within, and against the dark background of the sky they looked like a tropical version of the Aurora Borealis. From time to time a reddish fragment of moon could be glimpsed through these smoky apparitions, as it appeared, disappeared, and reappeared, like an anguished lantern drifting across the sky." There are many such stunning descriptions in this first section. The third section, for all its profound and richly historical meditations and its eccentricities, such as Lévi-Strauss's rather involved synopsis of a play he was writing, set in Ancient Rome under emperor Augustus, is essentially an attempt to deal with a personal crisis, stated clearly by our author here: "The world began without man and will end without him. The institutions, morals and customs that I shall have spent my life noting down and trying to understand are the transient efflorescence of a creation in relation to which they have no meaning, except perhaps that of allowing mankind to play its part in creation." What Lévi-Strauss is concluding with here - despite lengthy disquisitions upon such topics as Islam and entropy, amongst others - is nothing less than a question of what he is doing in this world - *Quelle est ma raison d'être?* - to which, of course, there is no satisfactory answer, though Lévi-Strauss certainly exhausts himself, and the reader, with possible avenues, centred around Buddhism for the most part. In the end, the book is a richly imagined collage of world-searching and soul-searching, especially recommended for those studying, in one way or another, *la maladie humaine*.

Fascinating classic by the prime anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss. It tells of his explorations and

studies in Brazil, where he worked on an off doing visits to isolated and often untouched tribes. He studies their sociology and how they live. On occasions, they live in total and extreme conditions, almost like wild animals, no shelter even. I later wrote an article about it for publication. Unsurpassable.

This book is really a number of books in one - a diatribe against the New World vis a vis the Old World, time spent with the natives in South America, and a bemoaning of the lack of progress by Mankind in its development. His comparison of the New and Old Worlds is probably quite apt - the Old World, with its social and physical structures evolved during a slower moving time and "was made to last". The New World came when progress was increasing much more quickly, new materials became available, and social and physical structures were relatively short term. His description is probably reasonably accurate, but I would have thought a little more thought as to the reasons and causes would have helped (along with a little more gratitude to the New World for giving him a home, all the while he was grizzling about them!) His accounts of his time with the various South American native groups I found disjointed, purely narrative, little rationale for the few conclusions that he did try to draw, and, in his descriptions of the various components of the Bororo society in Chapter 23, almost fanciful. Finally, as though he had put together the first two parts of the book for some other purpose, he launches into a different dialogue about the progress of mankind. He compares Islam society with the society of France, in that both have become fossilised at a time some centuries before, continuing to believe that what they evolved at those much earlier times should still stand them in good stead for the future. Although, in some ways the most interesting of the three parts, this last was to a large extent contradictory to the views espoused in the first part - in the latter he bemoaned the progress of mankind, and in the former he bemoaned the lack of progress of mankind. All in all, interesting read, but a little disappointing.

Interesting read. Learned a great deal from it. Would recommend it.

As I have worked my way through the four-volume masterpiece *Mythologies* I grew ever deeper into the mind of Claude Levi-Strauss. What a joy! Solid analytical understanding of that spontaneous play of the mind we call 'myth.' These works are some of the most significant contributions to the meaning of stories and storytelling I can think of with far reaching implications for all social practices. Finally I am getting around to reading this very ably translated work of the author's 'autobiography.' So fluent, so fluid, so vivid. It's a shame that 'structuralism' was seen merely as

another French 'fad' when it fact it offers an entrance into an endless mansion of pleasures.

Important for Brazilians to understand a bit of the country history regarding the eradication of indigenous population. Elegant story telling, despite the pessimistic tone which permeates the book.

Ancient cultures explain to us who are we... A must read

After disdaining 'travel writing' Levi-Strauss went on to write a masterpiece that among many other things is ultimate travel writing. This is a rich feast of past and lost worlds and cultures, of nature, an entire chapter beautifully describing the ocean sky at sunset, a vivid description of the ocean's doldrums, and then of course, the story of the people of the basin and the upland rain forests. All of this, prefaced by a horrific account of escaping the Nazi regime. Definitely a book to savor.

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