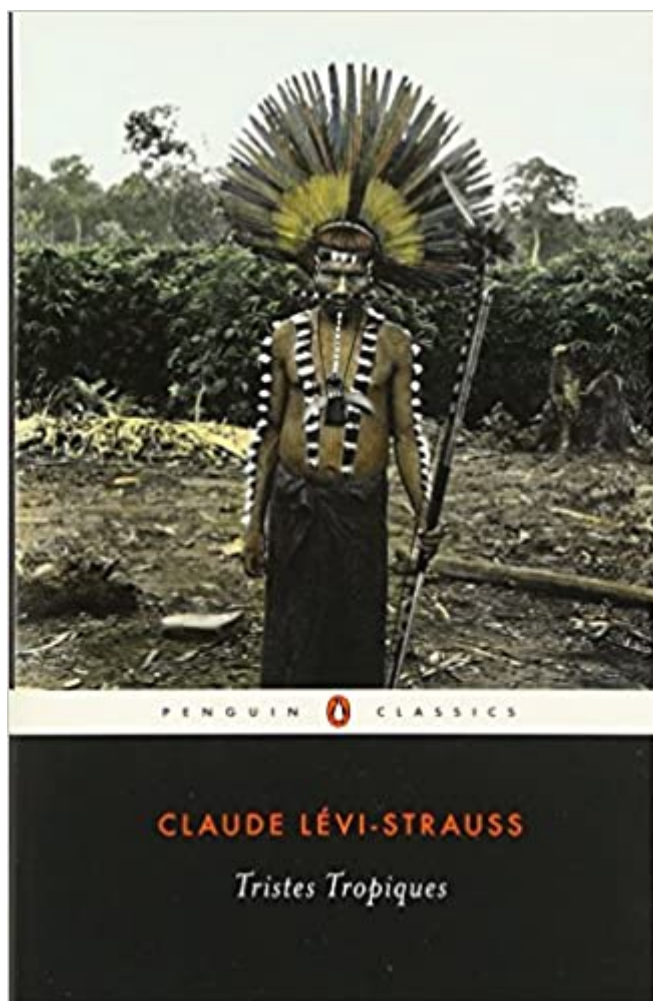


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# Tristes Tropiques (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

A milestone in the study of culture from the father of structural anthropology This watershed work records Claude Lévi-Strauss's search for "a human society reduced to its most basic expression." From the basin through the dense upland jungles of Brazil, Lévi-Strauss found the societies he was seeking among the Caduveo, Bororo, Nambikwara, and Tupi-Kawahib. More than merely recounting his time in their midst, *Tristes Tropiques* places the cultural practices of these peoples in a global context and extrapolates a fascinating theory of culture that has given the book an importance far beyond the fields of anthropology and continental philosophy. The author's fresh approach, sense of humor, and openness to the sensuous mystique of the tropics make the scientific thrust of the book eminently accessible. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

## Book Information

Series: Penguin Classics

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics; Revised ed. edition (January 31, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143106252

ISBN-13: 978-0143106258

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 1 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 31 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #318,891 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #34 in Books > Travel > South

America > Brazil > General #69 in Books > History > Americas > South America > Brazil

#1047 in Books > History > Americas > Native American

## Customer Reviews

*Tristes Tropiques* is one of the great books of our century," said Susan Sontag. "It is rigorous, subtle, and bold in thought. It is beautifully written. And, like all great books, it bears an absolutely personal stamp; it speaks with a human voice." *Tristes Tropiques* was an immensely popular

bestseller when it was first published in France in 1955. Claude Levi-Strauss's ground-breaking study of the societies of a number of Indian peoples is a cornerstone of structural anthropology and an exploration by the author of his own intellectual roots as a professor of philosophy in Brazil before the Second World War, as a Jewish exile from Nazi-occupied Europe, and later as a world-renowned academic (he taught at New York's New School for Social Research and was French cultural attaché to the United States). Levi-Strauss's central journey leads from the basin through the dense upland jungles of Brazil. There, among the Amerindian tribes--the Caduveo, Bororo, Nambikwara, and Tupi-Kawahib--he found "a human society reduced to its most basic expression." Levi-Strauss's discussion of his fieldwork in *Tristes Tropiques* endures as a milestone of anthropology, but the book is also, in its brilliant diversions on other, more familiar cultures, a great work of literature, a vivid travelogue, and an engaging memoir--a demonstration of the marvelous mental agility of one of the century's most important thinkers. Presented here is the translation by John and Doreen Weightman of the complete text of the revised French edition of 1968, together with the original photographs and illustrations. The Modern Library has played a significant role in American cultural life for the better part of a century. The series was founded in 1917 by the publishers Boni and Liveright and eight years later acquired by Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer. It provided the foundation for their next publishing venture, Random House. The Modern Library has been a staple of the American book trade, providing readers with affordable hard-bound editions of important works of literature and thought. For the Modern Library's seventy-fifth anniversary, Random House redesigned the series, restoring as its emblem the running torchbearer created by Lucian Bernhard in 1925 and refurbishing jackets, bindings, and type, as well as inaugurating a new program of selecting titles. The Modern Library continues to provide the world's best books, at the best prices.

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This "collage" of material, as Lévi-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 Lévi-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 in 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' Lévi-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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