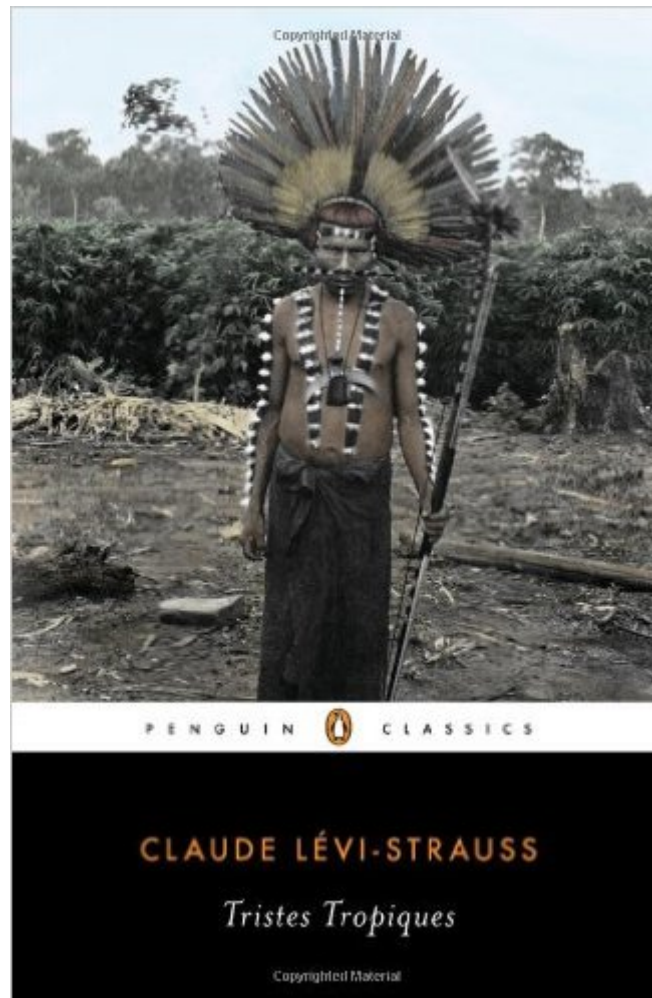


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# Tristes Tropiques (Penguin Classics)



## 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.

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## Customer Reviews

*Tristes Tropiques*, surely one of the great books of the twentieth century, is Levi-Strauss at his intoxicating, idea-overloaded best and an elegy for a world that colonialism and then globalisation have done their rational best to annihilate. Levi-Strauss, like most thinkers who come up with new

ways of describing the world-- those who Richard Rorty calls "inventors of philosophical vocabularies"-- has of course been mis-read and his ideas mis-applied, as we see with the much-hyped "creation" and then "demise" of "structural anthropology." The real pleasure of this book, which mixes fascinating accounts of Levi-Strauss' travels in Brazil in the '30s with autobiography, and adds chapters on the Maya and ancient Hindu (Indian) civilisations, is in its sheer mass of artfully arranged detail and its endless, provocative play of ideas. Levi-Strauss stays conversational, descriptive and straightforward, avoiding academic jargon and obscure references. He assumes you know the basics about people like Freud, Marx, Darwin and the Buddha, and then shows you a trip through largely non-industrial societies which unfolds from anthropological description into deep philosophical speculation on the meaning of society and life. In Brazil, Levi-Strauss watches an illiterate but canny chieftain use his anthropological fieldnotes to intimidate his illiterate tribesmen subordinates, and speculates on the parallel origins of writing and slavery. In Matto Grosso, he meets a butcher fascinated with elephants, since "he could not imagine so much meat in one place." On the banks of the , a non-industrial tribe is dying, hypnotically lost in the symbolic intricacies of an ancient social system that makes its citizens inbred.

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.

One way to gauge who's in among fashionable academics is to read the catalog for the "Writers and Readers' Documentary Comic Book" series. Sartre has an entry, and so does Derrida, and Lacan. Thirty years ago, you would have expected to find an entry in this index for Claude Levi-Strauss. No more. Translations of his principal works appear to persist in print, but the sales numbers are low, and he seems almost to have disappeared from the trendy book reviews and such. This is perhaps a matter for at least idle curiosity: Levi-Strauss is surely no more abstruse than his magisterial contemporaries - but no less so; one is perfectly willing to be relieved the obligation of ever picking him up again. With one exception. In style and temperament, *Tristes Tropiques* is so different from almost everything else Levi-Strauss wrote that it is hard to believe it is written by the same man. Oh, the primitive tribes are there, and a brief personal intellectual history, that offers a bow to Freud, and Bergeson, and Saussure. In my own copy, which I first read about 1980, I even have a pencilled notation "structuralism" - this at page 375 (Pocket Books edition, 1977). But there is almost none of the portentous vacuity that you had to cope with in the so-called "serious" works. What you get instead is Levi Strauss the raconteur, full of travelers' tales. He dines on roasted parrot, flamed with whisky. The termites make the earth rumble. Virgins are made to spit in pots of corn, to provoke fermentation - but "as the delicious drink, at once nutritious and refreshing, was consumed that very evening, the process of fermentation was not very advanced.

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