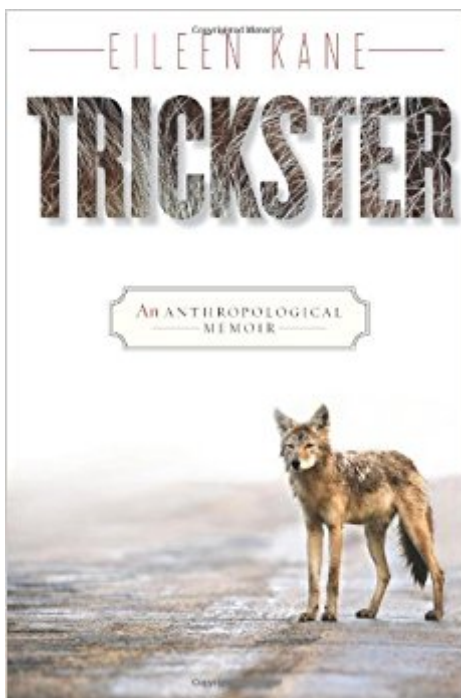


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Trickster: An Anthropological Memoir



Synopsis

A young trainee anthropologist leaves her violent Mafia-run hometown—Youngstown, Ohio—to study an "exotic" group, the Paiute Indians of Nevada. This is 1964; she'll be "the expert," and they'll be "the subjects." The Paiute elders have other ideas. They'll be "the parents." They set themselves two tasks: to help her get a good grade on her project and to send her home quickly to her new bridegroom. They dismiss her research topic and introduce her instead to their spirit creature, the outrageously mischievous rule-breaking trickster, Coyote. Why do the Paiutes love Coyote? Why do Youngstown mill workers vote for Mafia candidates for municipal office? Tricksters become key to understanding how oppressed groups function in a hostile world. For more information visit www.trickster.ie.

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Customer Reviews

Kane's book combines the depth of anthropology with the accessibility of the novel. It is written in a captivating and yet rich style, hilarious and entertaining for almost all readers. But above all, the book shows real people and normal human beings. Unlike other anthropology books, often riddled with meaningless, esoteric, anthropological jargon, Kane speaks in plain words and refuses to stand between the reader and the studied. Perhaps we should all go back to our field notes and rewrite our long-forgotten Ph.D. theses in the way Kane does here. The future of anthropology as a discipline may demand just that. (Irish Journal of Anthropology)

A real page turner. Kane has turned her first fieldwork experience into an engaging 'Margaret Mead meets Tony Hillerman' narrative, with vivid characters, many tricksters, and even a mysterious death. (Louise Lamphere, Distinguished Professor Emerita, University of New Mexico and past president of the American Anthropological Association) Trickster... should become essential reading for young anthropologists, if only because of its ruminations about the discipline as theory and praxis. (Michael Hittman, Long Island University) Kane avoids stilted ethnographic prose and instead revels in a self-effacing, first-person narrative that is richly textured, beautifully written, moving, and hilarious – precisely the kind of yarn that grabs and holds the attention of students and seasoned anthropologists alike. (Liam D. Murphy, California State University, Sacramento) A must read for every scholar who aspires to bring intellectual work to bear on the problems of real people and their communities. (Louis S. Warren, University of California, Davis) Eileen Kane is a fantastic writer – in fact, one of the best I've ever seen in anthropology, past or present. She keeps the story moving briskly, she has a novelist's eye for detail, and she renders perfect dialogue, which as Anne Lamont says, is the way to convey character. She's one of those rare anthropologists who can tell a great story while imparting cultural understanding. I hope she continues to tell stories. Anthropology needs a voice like hers. (Peter Wogan, Willamette University)

I found "Trickster", Eileen Kane's anthropological memoir a terrific read. It belongs more on the best seller shelves than the academic ones. Not that the book does not deserve its place in the universities where students can learn from her experiences in the field of anthropology, but it deserves a wider audience. Her writing is so funny, her dealings with Eddie, Thomasina, Charlene and co were laugh out loud bizarre, her experiences with the adults were equally mad but she was sympathetic even though they must have driven her crazy a lot of the time. The book gave me an intriguing look into the lives of people we in Ireland only knew as "Red Indians", if also a rather sad one. And indeed a very interesting insight into the politics and social mores of a provincial town in the 1960's America. Maureen Gleeson, Dublin, Ireland.

The trickster in the title isn't the author herself of course - the word being a reference to the mischievous and sometimes frightening anthropomorphic being found among many world cultures. He/she assumes several forms, often that of a coyote, to achieve unpredictable good or bad ends. The only trick Eileen Kane plays is the formidable one of turning her experiences as a fledgling anthropologist doing field work among the Native American Paiutes into a compulsively readable book. So maybe I'm naive but how many social scientists are such talented writers? How many

have told this rite of passage so well? The daughter of an Irish clan in Youngstown, Ohio, when it was a tough steelworkers town, she first came to Yerington, Nevada, in 1964 as a young graduate student and newly hatched bride - a bit of a sub story in the text - determined to do her profession proud. We are quickly absorbed into the lives of the 'characters', fully aware of them as people and not just subjects for the academic thesis she needs to advance her status. We follow her - and them - on return visits, sharing myriad and often hilarious adventures. Valuable source materials and 'discussion points' are included, as well as an epilogue in which she attempts to come to grips with the current state of her profession. "Anthropologists have never agreed on what culture is," she writes. The people she came to know so well over the years, she says, today "are quite able to study themselves." An index would have been helpful to keep straight names and connections, but this is a mere quibble up against an unusual and fascinating memoir.

The foreword at the beginning of this book describes the majority of the characters as "shadow-people who move between the boundaries of one real person and another" and it really shows. The Paiute characters in this book are so hard to tell apart I wonder if Kane even has them straight. The only character who stands out in the Paiute sections of the book is Larry who is a composite white character. The parts concerning Kane's studies are scattered among much more vivid and lengthy recollections of her childhood. The characters in those memories are not made up which makes the Youngstown pieces much easier to follow. I wish Kane had either decided to write a book about her childhood or stuck to memoir throughout. If you're going to write a memoir go ahead and write what you remember, that's the point of the genre, don't bother trying to create confusion with shadows life is confusing enough as it is.

I have always been fascinated by anthropology, but only lately have I started to study it in any detail. 'Trickster', by Eileen Kane, is for me the ideal companion to understanding the subject. In a readable, entertaining and above all informative memoir, Eileen takes the classroom lessons and theories and places them in the real world of the Paiute Indians of Nevada. Recently married, full of enthusiasm and the 'correct' ways to conduct research, she is sent by her Professor to study a group of people who kindly decide that things will be done on their terms! She is introduced to the stories and characters that explain their life. By exploring the discourse of the 'trickster' animals of wolf and coyote, Eileen develop a deeper understanding of both the Paiute world and her own upbringing in the tough Irish-American, and Mafia dominated, steel town of Youngstown. For me as a student, her numerous phone-calls home...her acceptance by the children of the town and the

matter of fact descriptions of those she meets, demonstrates that real anthropological fieldwork can be carried-out in a non daunting and enjoyable manner. Valuable and practice lessons can be drawn from this memoir and I found that her 'Epilogue' and concluding 'Discussion Points and Exercises' tie the story nicely into the academic world.'Trickster' is no ordinary student text book. It explains more than just the Paiute and Youngstown; there is a wolf and coyote trickster in every society. Most importantly, its a good read!

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