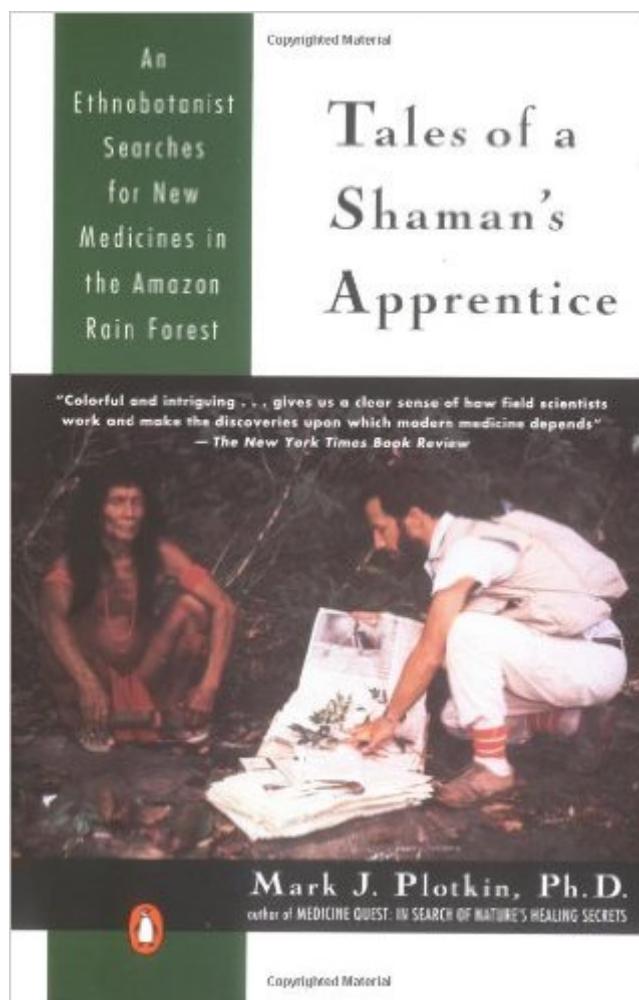


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Tales Of A Shaman's Apprentice: An Ethnobotanist Searches For New Medicines In The Rain Forest



Synopsis

For thousands of years, healers have used plants to cure illness. Aspirin, the world's most widely used drug, is based on compounds originally extracted from the bark of a willow tree, and more than a quarter of medicines found on pharmacy shelves contain plant compounds. Now Western medicine, faced with health crises such as AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, and cancer, has begun to look to the healing plants used by indigenous peoples to develop powerful new medicines. Nowhere is the search more promising than in the , the world's largest tropical forest, home to a quarter of all botanical species on this planetâ "as well as hundreds of Indian tribes whose medicinal plants have never been studied by Western scientists. In *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice*, ethnobotanist Mark J. Plotkin recounts his travels and studies with some of the most powerful ian shamans, who taught him the plant lore their tribes have spent thousands of years gleaning from the rain forest. For more than a decade, Dr. Plotkin has raced against time to harvest and record new plants before the rain forests' fragile ecosystems succumb to overdevelopmentâ "and before the Indians abandon their own culture and learning for the seductive appeal of Western material culture. *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice* relates nine of the author's quests, taking the reader along on a wild odyssey as he participates in healing rituals; discovers the secret of curare, the lethal arrow poison that kills in minutes; tries the hallucinogenic snuff epena that enables the Indians to speak with their spirit world; and earns the respect and fellowship of the mysterious shamans as he proves that he shares both their endurance and their reverence for the rain forest. Mark Plotkin combines the Darwinian spirit of the great writer-explorers of the nineteenth centuryâ "curious, discursive, and rigorously scientificâ "with a very modern concern for the erosion of our environment and the vanishing culture of native peoples.

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Customer Reviews

I agree wholeheartedly with the rave reviews for this book and it has become one of my favorites (I even sent it to an ethnobotanist in Yap as a must read). Not only is it wonderfully well-written, and not only does it address crucial ecological concerns, but it is an exciting account of Plotkin's effort to identify and explore the medical possibilities of ian plants, while preserving the indigineous lore about their uses, both medicinal and spiritual; the discovery and adoption of plants by Europeans and North Americans, and Plotkin's own adventures. I found some it so fascinating on so many levels I'd read it to my family (okay, I know that may be obnoxious, but I couldn't restrain myself). It's thought-provoking, important and absolutely fascinating. Can't recommend it highly enough!!

Reading this changed my perspective on Western civilization forever. One example is the author's revelation that the indiginous peoples weren't hunter-"gatherers" at all, but rather gardeners of the world's remaining Eden, inheritors of an agricultural tradition far more ancient and advanced than ours. I was stunned by the realization that Western agriculture's monocultures of neat little rows laid out in a landscape of squares is the simplistic imposition of a human order on a far more complex natural order- an order that the ian tribes incorporate in the design of their jungle-garden. A mindblowing paradigm shift awaits you, especially if you bring some knowledge of complex adaptive systems and/or Periodic Equilibrium evolution to this lucid journal. And this amazing personal account is a ripping good yarn. The only thing this book needs is a follow-up epilog, a "where are they now" of the pharmaceuticals, the shamans, the tribes, and the author's efforts to save them from extinction. A warning: Rereading this book in the summer of '98 while watching the rainforests of Indonesia and Mexico burn deeply depressed me. It was like a thousand libraries of Alexandria going up in smoke. Future generations will never forgive us.

I have recently written a review of Plotkin's book, which was taken off these pages - apparently simply because I disagreed with the author's assertions, conclusions and motives. I wouldn't go so far as to claim .com engages in censorship, but this action does lead me to believe some of the ratings may be skewed.I ahve two basic criticisms of this book: (1) The title is misleading. There was no apprenticeship involved - Plotkin learnt no ceremonies and no cures. He is not a shaman by

any stretch of imagination.(2) He is one of the hundreds of ethnobotanists who case the in search of clinically active plants; these people are no bleeding hearts - they do it for pharmaceutical industry, which generally pays a pittance to the indigenous people from whom the knowledge was taken. Plotkin himself was engaged with a such a company, called aptly enough, Shaman Pharmaceuticals. Now I think this is fair to lay out in a review, don't you? In my mind, Plotkin exemplifies a self-righteous attitude with which Westerners venture into contact with indigenous peoples, all too often under the guise of conservancy and environmental activism.... and then write books about it. I frankly cannot see what Plotkin had to do with apprenticeship to ian shamans and if this is enough to censor my review - well so be it.

"Everything you wanted to know about entering the Brazilian Rainforest, and more" could be the subtitle of this unusual but riveting nonfiction work Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice by an ethnobotanist, Mark Plotkin. Remember those naming games you played on summer nights? "If you were on a desert island, but could have one book with you, what would it be?" When I go up the , I'll be carrying this little tome under my arm. Before then, I will enjoy the adventure story and recommend it to others; use the bibliography for further research on the history of the rainforest; make lists of the flora, especially medicinal remedies, mentioned; trace along a map the various routes Plotkin took on his travels through Brazil, Surinam, and along the borders of Colombia and Venezuela. I could teach a year-long course based on the information in this book. What an English course that would be with all the links to ecology, botany, language studies, sociology, anthropology, survival training, medicine--the list goes on. Am I enthusiastic about Plotkin's work? It is the best book I have read in years even though, teaching literature, I read many fine books. It has affected me the way some people are converted by religion. If you have ever held a thoughtful concern for the rainforest or indigenous peoples or our earth or oxygen, it will affect you, too. Using a scholarly approach to his highly readable story makes this accessible to professional botanists or historians as well as to us lay people. The photographs each speak their thousand words and are worth the price of the book in themselves. What Rachel Carson did for the dangers of environmental pollution, Mark Plotkin does for the destruction of the fragile rainforest. Another game you played on summer nights--asking impossible questions like "If a tree fell in a forest, but no one were there to hear it, would it create a sound?" Plotkins makes indelibly clear the effect the fallen trees of the rainforests have on us all.

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