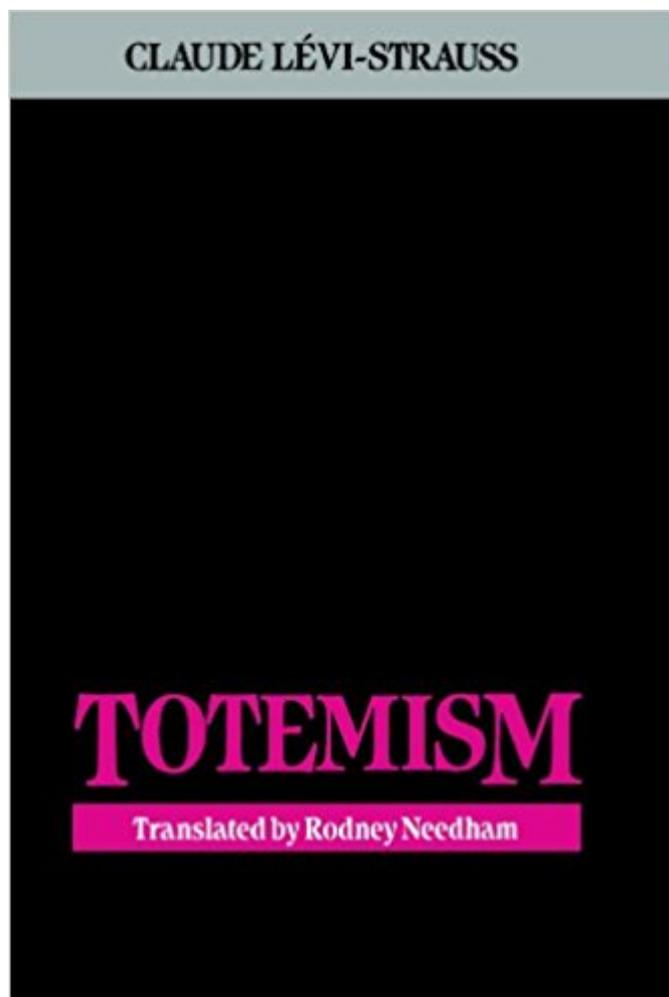


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Totemism



Synopsis

"Levi-Strauss continues his assault on the myth of the primitive as savage by turning to the phenomena of totemism and totemic classification ... to show, contrary to this myth, that primitive thought rests upon a rich and complex conceptual structure." — Commentary

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I had no intention of reading this book. The book I wanted to read was Levi-Strauss's *THE SAVAGE MIND*. However, that book begins with "This book is complete in itself, but the problems it discusses are closely linked to those which I surveyed more hastily in a recent work entitled *TOTEMISM* (trans. Rodney Needham, London, 1964). Without wishing to oblige the reader to refer to it, it is proper to draw his attention to the connection between the two: the first forms a kind of historical and critical introduction to the second." So I put down the book and ordered *TOTEMISM*. I do not have a strong background in anthropology. My reason for reading the book is to research another project. "Totemism" was the most difficult thing for me to understand in Durkheim's *THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE*. But I just decided that it wasn't important for me to understand for my particular project. However, I was obviously not the only one who didn't understand "Totemism." On reading this book, I now understood why: because there's no such thing! (Levi-Strauss compares it to writing about "Hysteria.") Levi-Strauss carefully lays out all the reasons that such eminent and respected minds as Boas, Malinowsky, and Durkheim (among others) were mistaken. Most of the time, I had no difficulty

following Levi-Strauss's arguments, but I occasionally found it helpful to read some brief encyclopedic entries about some of the people and things he mentions. But those with a better background should have no problem. This was, for me at least, a fascinating book and I was awed by the solution that Levi-Strauss comes up with. According to him, the anthropologists had got it all wrong! For the correct answer, look all the way back to Rousseau (!) and then hear what the 20th Century philosopher Henri Bergson has to say. And Levi-Strauss makes it seem perfectly obvious. I can't wait to start THE SAVAGE MIND. Five stars.

A classic of 20th Century intellectual creativity, that has been recognized as such, but that has not yet received the full attention it deserves. It has momentarily be dispensed of as "old fashioned", when social sciences based on neuro-sciences has clearly not yet integrated the vast web of implications the formulations of this volume generate. An absolute must, even - or because - many formulations are arguable. It is not a book that proposes conclusions, but awakens our intelligence.

I loved this book, even did a painting on it. I can't imagine not having read it.

Don't read this book for pleasure. Only read it if you have to. It's useful if you have a good reason to read it.

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