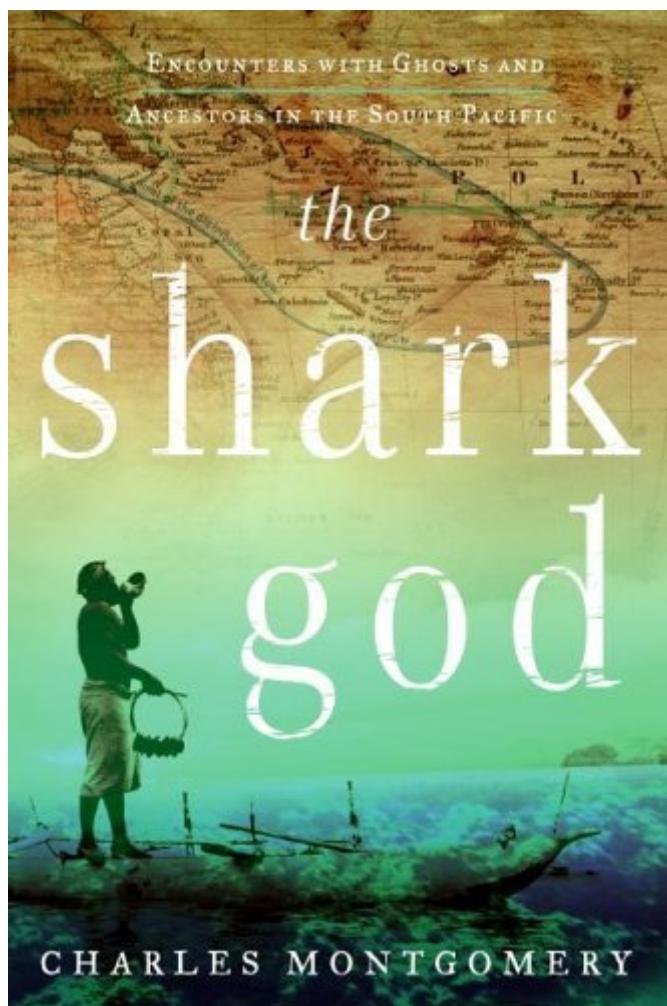


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The Shark God: Encounters With Ghosts And Ancestors In The South Pacific



Synopsis

When Charles Montgomery was ten years old, he stumbled upon the memoirs of his great-grandfather, a seafaring missionary in the South Pacific. Poring over the faint text and faded pictures, he was entranced by the world of black magic and savagery the bishop described, and couldn't help but wonder what drove the Victorian to risk his life among people who had shot, drowned, or clubbed to death so many of his predecessors. Twenty years later and a century after that journey, Montgomery sets out for the reefs and atolls of Melanesia in search of the very spirits and myths the missionaries had sought to destroy. He retraces his ancestor's path through the far-flung islands, exploring the bond between faith and magic, the eerie persistence of the spirit world, and the heavy footprints of Empire. What he discovers is a world of sorcery and shark worship, where the lines between Christian and pagan rituals are as blurred as the frontiers of fact, fantasy, and faith. After confrontations with a bizarre cast of cult leaders, militants, and mystics, the author, in his quest for ancient magic, is led to an island in crisis -- and to a new myth with the power to destroy or to save its people forever. Alternately terrifying, moving, and hilarious, with overtones of Melville and Conrad, *The Shark God* is Montgomery's extraordinary and piercingly intelligent account of both Melanesia's transformation and his own. This defiantly original blend of history and memoir, anthropology and travel writing, marks the debut of a singular new talent.

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Customer Reviews

Honestly I really didn't particularly like the author or any of the people he talked about in the book. The author was raised Anglican and though was a non-believer he took off to the Solomon Islands and other South Seas islands following the steps of his great grandfather. He was really looking for the original beliefs of the natives. What he found for the most part was a blend of Christianity and magic. He also found, particularly the Solomons, to be lawless, corrupt and torn by civil war. Parts of it were very humorous. Montgomery is a good writer. I particularly enjoyed his descriptions of Guadalcanal. It certainly did not cause me to want to go there. My dad was there in WWII and from the author's description it sounded like it was safer when dad got there than it is now. He did not find Paradise. He found squalor and lack of infrastructure pretty much every where he went. I saw pretty much the same thing in Micronesia (Truk Lagoon). The diving was great, the live aboard was great. The island was a dump.

Couldn't get into it so I didn't finish it. It just didn't grab me, although it might interest other readers.

If you are interested in mythology, religion, anthropology, or travel writing, I highly recommend this book. It is beautifully written and the author makes some very provocative statements on faith and myth. The only thing I found troubling was the author's dismissal of pedophilia committed by a missionary the author admired.

Less than a journal. Less than a travelogue. Less than a plotted story. Less than an anthropological study.

Following in the footsteps of his missionary grandfather, Charles Montgomery returns to Melanesia to seek out the truth of its ancestral religion - and is surprised by what he finds. Montgomery's writing is beautiful, sparse, and evocative, and his sympathy for the people of Melanesia is evident without being condescending. His constant battles with seasickness, his facility with the local pidgin (I could even understand it by the time the book was done), his descriptions of the grim aftermath of colonialism all ring true. Most impressive, however, is Montgomery's wrestling with his Christian

past, his atheist present, and the subtle and complicated reality of religion on the islands.

Montgomery is clearly hungry for something more than the scientific world around him, but he demands scientific proof in order to find it. Only in his encounter with the indigenous Christian priests does he find out the truth of religion might be something else than miracles and spirits - it might just be sacrificial love.

Having a missionary ancestor is a fine prompt for travel. Most early missionaries, to justify their existence and purpose, were dogged journal keepers. Montgomery's grandfather was no exception. Rev. H.H. Montgomery had not only kept extensive notes, but much of that collection and other thoughts were produced in a book, "The Light of Melanesia". Discovering that account led Vancouver-born Charles to light out to the Pacific to see the results of his grandfather's and other missionaries' endeavours. In keeping his own records, Charles has produced a 21st Century adventure yarn of captivating interest. If there is a pivotal point in this book, it is the 1871 "murder" of Bishop John C. Patteson. The bishop seems to have died happy - martyrdom has an appeal to some religious folk. The century following may have justified his bizarre view, since his death has become a symbol to the local people. For one thing, they are able to brag that "we don't kill white folks any more". The author has some reason to doubt this claim as he travels through Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. He has trouble separating the various Christianities spread throughout the islands. A good many of them are still practising various forms of ancient witchcraft as part of their new religious activities. Montgomery sets himself a quest to find Melanesian witchcraft in its pure form. This is easier told than accomplished, since today's missionaries, and many of their converts, hunt down the practitioners. Sometimes with violence. The islanders, however, have a long warrior tradition supporting their activities and working out winners and losers is challenging. Still, for him to unearth the ancient practices, he must trek deep into mountain hideaways, convince those claiming to hold special powers that he won't reveal them to Christian authorities, and come away unscathed. If the Melanesians don't do him in, the weather is always waiting for its own chance. "Getting there is half the fun" as the author haunts docks and ships seeking elusive transport. Ships run weekly, monthly, or when fuel money is produced. His persistence ought to be worth some kind of award. His luck might be due to some recognition, as well. In the islands, the witchcraft Montgomery seeks is based on "mana". Mana is the life force and may be transferred from one human to another - by head hunting [cognitive scientists take note]. The more exalted the victim, the greater the mana. The missionaries, and the military forces they frequently called in to support them, sought to quell the practice. Their substitution was "Christian love", which often took a beating when the islanders

objected to their land being taken or their wives and daughters raped. Montgomery laces the history of missionary work with his personal account seamlessly. Daily confronting the results of what the missionaries imposed [this book was originally titled: "The Last Heathen"] Montgomery's scepticism of their work can only be enhanced. Belief, however, is an immense force among humans.

Montgomery realises he cannot dismiss it thoughtlessly. The result of his quest results in a fascinating essay on what "religion" has come to mean to the Pacific Islanders. It's far from what the missionaries intended - and intend - but it's demonstrably real. The book is a valuable social commentary, both about the Pacific islands and our own culture. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

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