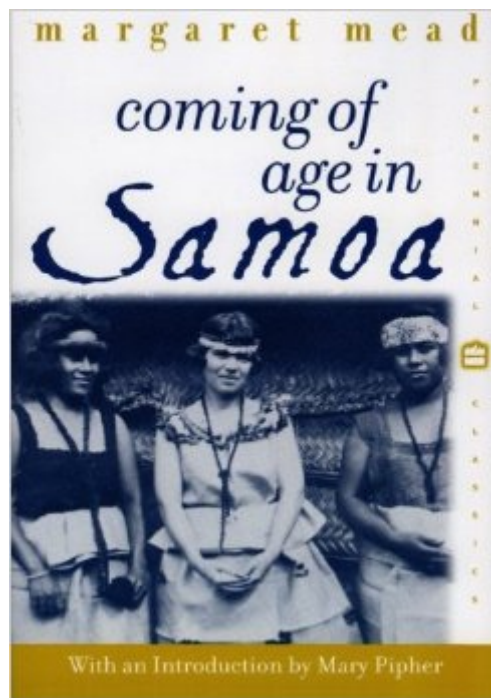


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Coming Of Age In Samoa: A Psychological Study Of Primitive Youth For Western Civilisation (Perennial Classics)



Synopsis

Rarely do science and literature come together in the same book. When they do -- as in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, for example -- they become classics, quoted and studied by scholars and the general public alike. Margaret Mead accomplished this remarkable feat not once but several times, beginning with *Coming of Age in Samoa*. It details her historic journey to American Samoa, taken where she was just twenty-three, where she did her first fieldwork. Here, for the first time, she presented to the public the idea that the individual experience of developmental stages could be shaped by cultural demands and expectations. Adolescence, she wrote, might be more or less stormy, and sexual development more or less problematic in different cultures. The "civilized" world, she taught us had much to learn from the "primitive." Now this groundbreaking, beautifully written work has been reissued for the centennial of her birth, featuring introductions by Mary Pipher and by Mead's daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In the unpaginated 'Preface [to the] 1973 Edition', Margaret Mead stresses that her description of Samoan moeurs should be read as applying to conditions at the time of her research. She finds it needful to 'shout' that advice because during her 1971 brief visit to Samoa, 'young critics even asked me when am I going to revise this book and look unbelieving and angry when I say that to revise it is impossible'. This is a reference to an abrasive session with students who told her that her description of fa'aSamoa (Samoan custom) was false and insulting. They were miffed by her styling

Samoans 'primitives' and her pronouncement that since anthropologists enjoy an 'immense superiority', they can 'master the fundamental structure' [of primitive society] . . . 'in a few months' (p. 8). In keeping with this arrogance, Samoans attending university were told by their instructors that their experience of fa'a Samoa was not valid evidence against Mead's scientific study. And, as we've just seen, Mead refused to revise her book even when she knew that it is mistaken in many particulars. For Samoans this patronizing manner was the familiar voice of the papalagi (the colonial power). Mead's hosts on her field trip, aware that she enjoyed the protection of the Pacific Fleet admiral and Boss of American Samoa, went to great lengths to provide reliable information. When they learned of what they call her luma fai tele ('shameless defamaton'), they could not comprehend how she could have betrayed their hospitality. They were also aggrieved that she deceived them about her marital status. For she accepted the title taupou (ceremonial virgin) although as a married woman she was ineligible. Then she disgraced the title by carrying on with Aviata, a young man regarded as a rake.

The first 12 chapters of this book are timeless, in that they capture a people in a certain place and time. The detailed description of several girls and a specific community gives the reader a look into a very different culture with little bias. However, the final chapters take a darker turn attempting to compare apples to oranges, one culture's positives against another's negatives. Mead wrote this book with American educators in mind several generations ago. Unfortunately, when pieces of this self-sufficient, simpler culture were cherry-picked and idealized for American society, it created a socially contentious atmosphere in the more complicated and global American culture. In Chapter 13, she notes that when European standards for sexual behavior intrude - the need for choice, the forerunner of conflict, will enter into Samoan Society. • At the core of American culture is the human right to choose for one's self, therefore the two societies are fundamentally different and should be examined individually not compared as though one is better than the other. Mead also reveals her views against nuclear families and parents' key roles in their children's upbringing. In Chapter 14, she says 'it is a question of the absence of a common standard far more than of the nature of the standards,' referring to how children are parented differently in American households. On the next page she continues, 'it is unfair that very young children should be the battleground for conflicting standards, that their development should be hampered by propagandist attempts to enlist and condition them too young.' Finally, Mead contradicts herself in suggesting 'the home must cease to please an ethical cause or a religious belief with smiles or frowns, caresses or threats.'

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