




Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author

By Clifford Geertz

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The illusion that ethnography is a matter of sorting strange and irregular facts into familiar and orderly categories?this is magic, that is technology?has long since been exploded. What it is instead, however, is less clear. That it might be a kind of writing, putting things to paper, has now and then occurred to those engaged in producing it, consuming it, or both. But the examination of it as such has been impeded by several considerations, none of them very reasonable. One of these, especially weighty among the producers, has been simply that it is an unanthropological sort of thing to do. What a proper ethnographer ought properly to be doing is going out to places, coming back with information about how people live there, and making that information available to the professional community in practical form, not lounging about in libraries reflecting on literary questions. Excessive concern, which in practice usually means any concern at all, with how ethnographic texts are constructed seems like an unhealthy self-absorption?time wasting at best, hypochondriacal at worst. The advantage of shifting at least part of our attention from the fascinations of field work, which have held us so long in thrall, to those of writing is not only that this difficulty will become more clearly understood, but also that we shall learn to read with a more percipient eye. A hundred and fifteen years (if we date our profession, as conventionally, from Tylor) of asseverational prose and literary innocence is long enough.

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Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author By Clifford Geertz Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #395184 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Stanford University Press
- Published on: 1989-06-01
- Released on: 1989-06-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.40" h x .70" w x 5.40" l, .52 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 157 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz analyzes the writings of anthropologists, specifically ethnographers. What makes a reader take an account seriously, he argues, is the ability of the researcher to capture on paper the experience of having been to a place, not just his ability to report facts. Geertz compares the literary styles of Claude Levi-Strauss, Edward Evans-Pritchard and Bronislaw Malinowski, among others, and calls upon present-day ethnographers to enliven and substantiate their work by paying attention not only to what they write, but how they write as well. *Work and Lives* won a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1988.

From Library Journal

In this groundbreaking study, noted anthropologist Geertz focuses on the writing of anthropologists, specifically ethnographers. He argues that what makes readers take an account of field work seriously is not simply the recounting of facts but the ability to capture on paper the experience of having "been there." As exemplars, Geertz analyzes the unique and decidedly different literary approaches of Claude Levi-Strauss, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict. Geertz calls upon ethnographers today not only to document their findings but to revitalize their field by paying attention to the crucial role of how they write. An engrossing work for scholars and graduate students. Joan W. Gartland, Detroit P.L. Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Review

An engrossing work for scholars and graduate students. -- *Library Journal*, Joan W. Gartland

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