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Record: 1

Title: Book reviews.

Authors: Trachtman, Paul

Source: Smithsonian; Apr97, Vol. 28 Issue 1, p135, 5p

Document Type: Book Review

Subject Terms: *BOOKS

Reviews & Products: SAVAGES (Book)

Abstract: Reviews the book `Savages,' by Joe Kane.

Full Text Word Count: 1612

ISSN: 00377333

Accession Number: 9704030583

Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9704030583&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Savages

Joe Kane

Knopf, \$25

The death of a rain forest is one of those tragedies we know about as news, but we don't mourn such news the way we mourn the death of a friend. Even the most haunting visual images of slashed-and-burned wastelands or oil-blackened rivers in the jungle tend to shock the eyes but numb the heart. It is one of the paradoxes of modern global media, such as television, that the more they make us aware of our world, the less intimate that awareness becomes.

Joe Kane is a writer with the sense to know that tragedy without intimacy is mere information and with the skill to show us the loss of a rain forest as the loss of many friends. In *Savages* he takes us with him into the heart of the Ecuadorian rain forest, in a quest to understand the people who live there. His portrait of the Huaorani (pronounced wow-rah-nee) as they face destruction by the operations of an American oil company is as gripping as a Conrad novel, full of strong characters and wild landscapes. Some literary critics believe that the traditional novel is being replaced by what they have called the nonfiction novel; if so, Joe Kane's *Savages* is a classic example of the genre.

Kane was working for an environmental organization, the Rainforest Action Network, when the Huaorani became the center of a political dispute: in a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund charged that oil drilling on Huaorani land would be ethnocide, "that for the sake of enough oil to meet U.S. energy needs for thirteen days, the Huaorani way of life would be destroyed." Other environmental groups were trying to work out deals on behalf of the Huaorani and fighting among themselves for control of funds the oil companies might set aside to help the tribe. Still other interests, including missionaries, politicians and land-hungry colonists, were pressing for access to the Huaorani heartland. But, with the exception of a few individuals, none of these groups had ever in fact met the Huaorani face-to-face. "For all the ruckus being raised," Kane writes, "no one knew what the Huaorani wanted. No one really knew who the Huaorani were."

Kane left his job and went to Ecuador to find out. He first met a few leaders in the town of Coca. Then, despite threats from a local military commander who denied him permission to visit the Huaorani interior, he slipped past an army checkpoint into the jungle in a truck loaded with Huaoranis who were hanging from the sides and piled on top of him. In his very first encounter with them, Kane caught the spirit of a people trying to grasp the modern world in terms of the ancient forest. At a Coca hotel he met Amo and Enqueri:

[Enqueri] had hardly any teeth at all, and he was wearing a pair of headphones that appeared to be plugged into his right hip pocket. When I asked him what he was listening to, he replied in a tone so solemn I was sure I had committed a horrible breach of Huaorani etiquette. "I am listening," he said, "to my pants." He let that hang for a moment, and then he and Amo collapsed with laughter, rolling on the ground and cackling wildly.

"To your pants!" Amo gasped. "What do they say?" "They say, 'Wash me, you moron!'"

With them was a young warrior named Moi, who seemed to have the clearest vision of his tribe's impending fate. The Huaorani had elected these men to protect their way of life from the Company (a name they used for all the oil companies and their various allies). But they had no office, no phone and no money. When Kane asked what they proposed to do, Moi answered softly, "We will find the Company and talk to them. If they do not listen, we will attack with spears from all sides."

Kane spent the better part of two years with the Huaorani, visiting their villages and taking an apartment in Quito, where they visited him from time to time. He shared their way of life and began to understand it. At first the jungle was an ordeal he would barely survive: "Enqueri announced that we would walk until 'five minutes after five.' This puzzled me--it was true that he wore a watch, but it didn't work. In any case we walked for perhaps ten hours, during which I fell, slid, and stumbled and got stung, bit, and branch-whipped so often that by the time Enqueri announced, 'Five minutes after five,' I had no idea of direction or distance, of where we were or even where we were going."

A year or so later he could see things differently, in the company of a Huaorani elder named Mengatohue: "Walking in the forest with him was like visiting an immense library with a master librarian. No matter how seemingly wild, every patch of ground had a history. Here he had planted chonta palm that in the time of Moi's children would provide wood for spears. Here balsa had reclaimed an old manioc garden and would be harvested for earplugs and rafts. Here a man had been spear-killed; here a jaguar appeared now and then. Here were plants for treating snakebite, diarrhea, skin rash. Here a patch of the hallucinogen ayahuasca that would soon be ready to brew into tea. I began to see the forest not as wild and unknown but as managed and inventoried, shaped and maintained by man as much as it shaped and maintained him."

This was the forest Kane and the Huaorani saw being destroyed by dynamite, bulldozers, helicopters, barbed wire and oil--spilled into the rivers and poisoning the earth until some areas looked like "one big toxic sponge"--while missionary-run schools invaded their villages, destroying their language, culture and way of life. When Kane encountered them, in the early 1990s, a generation of Huaorani had already been to such schools and had some experience working for the Company, but the young men like Moi and Amo and Enqueri were trying to use that experience to save their villages and values. What they were seeking, Kane learned, was "a Huaorani synthesis: a traditional way of living enhanced by certain modern tools that offered access to an abundancia not found in the forest and on which, increasingly, they had come to depend." Paradoxically, one of the most important of those tools was literacy. The Huaorani had found that delivering a written demand to the Company, "particularly when it . . . invoked threats of violence and when the authors appeared in person brandishing spears," often produced a host of goods--tools, food, radios, boots and the like. Literacy, Kane observed, raised the traditional Huaorani practice of hunting and gathering to an entirely new level.

As Kane watched, however, neither spears nor literacy could keep the Company out of the Huaorani forests. One tribal leader was mysteriously assassinated, another seduced by bribes, and with the help of some anthropologists and missionaries, oil executives organized new elections and lavish ceremonies to legitimize their juggernaut. On a visit to Coca, Kane talked to a veteran Capuchin monk who posed this question: "When the Huaorani kill, there is a spiritual discipline to it. Americans kill without knowing they are doing it. You don't want to

know you are doing it. And yet you are going to destroy an entire way of life. So you tell me: Who are the savages?"

After Kane returned to the United States, he saw Moi one more time, in Washington, D.C. The Huaorani warrior came to talk to the diplomats on the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, who applauded him but offered no help. Moi carried a letter inviting the President of the United States to visit the Huaorani, and telling him, "We do not want to be civilized by your missionaries or killed by your oil companies." Wearing a crown of bird feathers made from owl, eagle, toucan, parrot and wild turkey, Moi went to the White House gate to deliver his letter. But the gate was closed, and Kane barely dissuaded him from climbing over it. ("I will climb the trees and hide," Moi argued. "I will pretend I am hunting monkeys.") Moi returned to his rain forest, less a hero than a tragic figure, going home to take up spears against the Company.

Several months after Moi's journey to Washington, the first pipeline on Huaorani land was opened. Disaster ensued almost instantly: at a bend in the river where Kane often had canoed with his Huaorani companions, another pipe-line ruptured, dumping so much oil into the river that the slick extended for more than 30 miles.

"But that was nothing," Kane writes, to "what happened a few months earlier, in the same place: One of the wells in the Cononaco field burst into flame and burned out of control for nearly a week. It was, by most accounts, the biggest fire ever seen in the Oriente [region]. The oil-fed flames were said to have leaped so high that they dwarfed the great forest itself, and to have spread so fast that no man could outrun them."

Kane also draws lucid portraits of the oil executives, missionaries and environmentalists who the Huaorani speak of, collectively, as cowode, their word for cannibals. And through Kane's eyes, we can see Moi and the Huaorani's fate as a tragedy in which we have all indeed played a part.

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By Paul Trachtman

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