



Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice: An Ethnobotanist Searches for New Medicines in the Amazon Rain Forest

By Mark J. Plotkin

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For thousands of years, healers have used plants to cure illness. Aspirin, the world's most widely used drug, is based on compounds originally extracted from the bark of a willow tree, and more than a quarter of medicines found on pharmacy shelves contain plant compounds. Now Western medicine, faced with health crises such as AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, and cancer, has begun to look to the healing plants used by indigenous peoples to develop powerful new medicines. Nowhere is the search more promising than in the Amazon, the world's largest tropical forest, home to a quarter of all botanical species on this planet—as well as hundreds of Indian tribes whose medicinal plants have never been studied by Western scientists. In *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice*, ethnobotanist Mark J. Plotkin recounts his travels and studies with some of the most powerful Amazonian shamans, who taught him the plant lore their tribes have spent thousands of years gleaning from the rain forest.

For more than a decade, Dr. Plotkin has raced against time to harvest and record new plants before the rain forests' fragile ecosystems succumb to overdevelopment—and before the Indians abandon their own culture and learning for the seductive appeal of Western material culture. *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice* relates nine of the author's quests, taking the reader along on a wild odyssey as he participates in healing rituals; discovers the secret of curare, the lethal arrow poison that kills in minutes; tries the hallucinogenic snuff epena that enables the Indians to speak with their spirit world; and earns the respect and fellowship of the mysterious shamans as he proves that he shares both their endurance and their reverence for the rain forest. Mark Plotkin combines the Darwinian spirit of the great writer-explorers of the nineteenth century—curious, discursive, and rigorously scientific—with a very modern concern for the erosion of our environment and the vanishing culture of native peoples.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A century ago, malaria was killing Washingtonians, Londoners, Parisians. Today HIV, along with various cancers, has taken its place among worldwide epidemics. Quinine, extracted from the cinchona tree of the Amazonian rainforest, quelled malaria; alkaloids taken from trees in the West African rainforest may well yield a cure for AIDS. Yet those woods, Mark Plotkin tells us, are fast disappearing, along with the native peoples who know the powers of the plants that dwell there. His account of wandering through the Amazonian jungles focuses on local knowledge about plants, whose uses range from the mundane to the magical. The rainforests of the world, Plotkin notes, are our greatest natural resource, an intercultural pharmacy that can cure woes both known and yet unvisited.

From Publishers Weekly

Ethnobotanist Plotkin details the alternative medicines he discovered during an apprenticeship to the shamans of the Amazon rainforests.

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From School Library Journal

YA-Plotkin is a scientist who lived with indigenous tribes in the Amazon areas of Guyana and Suriname in order to learn about their native plants and how they use them medicinally. This book covers the 10 years during which he visited isolated villages and recorded their plant lore. Amid tales of adventure and descriptions of exotic wildlife and scenery, the author emphasizes how the coming of modern society has unalterably changed these societies. Young people have lost interest in the traditional way of life and the shamans have no one to whom they can pass on their valuable knowledge. He discusses companies and organizations that are working to return some drug-sale profits to the Indians, establish shaman apprentice programs among the tribes, and preserve this valuable habitat. An absorbing book that goes miles beyond the mass market "save the rain forest" campaign to explain this important issue to teens.

Penny Stevens, Fairfax Public Library, VA

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