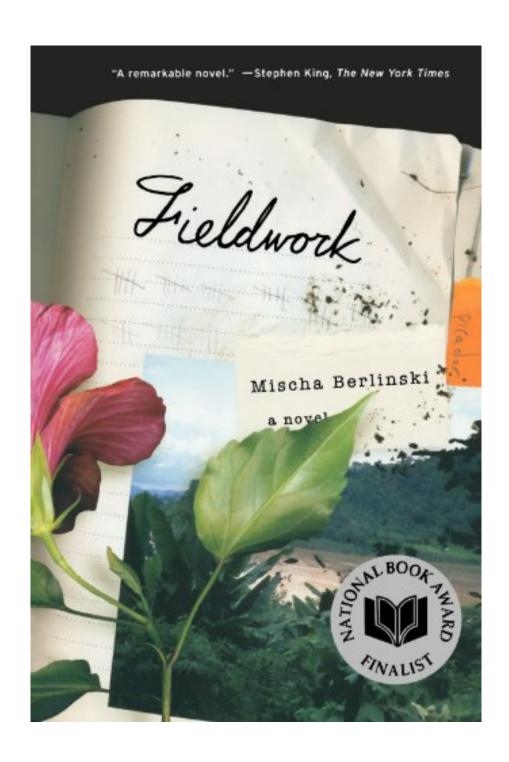


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When his girlfriend takes a job in Thailand, Mischa Berlinski goes along for the ride, planning to enjoy himself and work as little as possible. But one evening a fellow expatriate tips him off to a story: a charismatic American anthropologist, Martiya van der Leun, has been found dead--a suicide--in the Thai prison where she was serving a life sentence for murder. Curious at first, Mischa is soon immersed in the details of her story. This brilliant, haunting novel expands into a mystery set among the Thai hill tribes, whose way of life became a battleground for the missionaries and the scientists living among them. Fieldwork is a 2007 National Book Award Finalist for Fiction.

Sales Rank: #18782 in BooksBrand: Berlinski, Mischa

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Most helpful customer reviews

70 of 78 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent Book

By Amazon Customer

Well-researched and excellently paced novel. I was fascinated by the level of detail and found the non-judgmental tone of the author refreshing. The novel ended up being an anthropological study of 3 separate tribes--the fictional Dyalo (who appear to be based on the Lisu tribe the novelist studied extensively--look on [...]), American Protestant missionaries, and the curious tribe that lives in figurative ivory towers who spend their lives studying other tribes. The author seems to suggest that the universal tragedy that serves as the basis for the murder mystery aspect of the novel is the result not merely a simplistic clash between East and West, but one that can happen to any peoples who do not share the same world view or to anyone in any culture subject to common human emotions.

Terrific read, and highly recommended. I look forward to Mr. Berlinksi's future literary output--maybe something set in Italy, or perhaps involving Haitian voodoo cults?

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

A Unique and Fascinating Literary Hybrid

By B. Case

"Fieldwork," by Mischa Berlinski, is a fascinating literary hybrid--part mystery novel, part fictionalized memoir, and part well-research (but completely fictionalized) cultural anthropology. The writing is outstanding--easy and unadorned with lyrical touches that appear out of nowhere to delight and beguile. There is also a surprising amount of subtle humor that pops up unexpectedly throughout. The characters are spot-on perfect--so utterly authentic that it's almost impossible to believe the author when he admits in the end notes that: "None of this stuff happened to anyone."

I found this book absorbing, unique, and fascinating in just about every respect. What interested me most, was not the plot so much as it was the chance to immerse myself in a multitude of exotic new worlds--worlds

that I would never have experienced on my own. In this book, readers are invited inside many diverse worlds, in particular: the culture of evangelical Christian missionaries working with the hill tribes of Northern Thailand, the culture of worldwide present-day expatriates in Thailand, the culture of 1980s UC Berkeley Graduate School of Anthropology students, the culture of the fictional Thailand hill tribe of the Dyalos, and a number of other minor cultural experiences both historical and contemporary along the way.

For me, the entire reading experience was like one entertaining intellectual armchair adventure ride!

Briefly, the book tells the story of a female UC Berkeley-trained anthropologist, who murdered an evangelical Christian missionary around 1990 in the wilds of Northern Thailand. Before the murder, the anthropologist had been studying and living with a single Dyalo hill tribe for 15 years. The man she murdered spoke Dyalo like a native. He loved the Dyalo as if they were his own family because he was raised alongside them in China near the Thai border. As an infant and small child, his missionary parents raised him in an American-style home built with enormous difficulty in an isolated valley populated primarily by Dyalo tribesmen. The family had to flee to Thailand from their "Eden Valley" home in the 1950s when China expelled all foreigners. The missionary family moved to Northern Thailand. Eventually the anthropologist and the missionary crossed paths, and the murder took place. The anthropologist was tried and convicted for her crime. She served 15 years of a 50-year sentence in a Thai prison before taking her own life. An American expatriate freelance journalist living in present-day Thailand investigates the whole story and relates his findings to us. In a twist that may make some purists cringe, the author names his fictional narrator after himself. Thus, the novel takes on the quality of a memoir, albeit, a totally fictional one.

Obviously, this is a book about clashing cultural values. To the author's great credit, he treats both sides with enormous humanity and understanding.

Little by little over the course of this detailed novel, we learn about the precise circumstances surrounding the murder. In the end, all the physical pieces come together. But knowing the exact circumstances of the murder, however satisfying they are to know, is not what this book is all about. Once readers finishes this book, they will start pondering all the diverse global political, economic, social, psychological, religious, and ecological issues that the work stirs up. Somewhere in the middle of all those issues, each reader will come to terms with the underlying motivations behind the murder. So the plot is just the enticing thread that leads us toward and into a lot of major contemporary social issues.

You have to love reading all three parts of this chimera--the novel, the memoir, and the pseudo-nonfiction cultural anthropology--or this book will fail to please you. At first, it wasn't easy getting used to reading this hybrid. For me, it was a wholly different type of reading experience, and I actually needed to adjust my normal reading pattern in order get into the swing of things, and start enjoying the experience. Perhaps I'm not like other readers, but I tend to read novels, memoirs, and nonfiction works in different ways. I started out reading this book as if it were a novel, and that was wrong for me. I ended up reading this book as if I were reading nonfiction and that seemed to work better. If your reading tastes are broad and happily encompass novels, memoirs, and nonfiction works of cultural anthropology, then you'll probably love this book as much as I did. If you don't enjoy one of those three types of reading, or if you want the book to be only one type and not all three, then you'll probably have difficulty getting into and through this work...or, if you do, you'll probably find significant fault with the work as a whole. My advice: expect a hybrid, read it as a hybrid, and you will probably not be disappointed.

I can easily see why this unique novel caught the attention of nationwide book critics and was a finalist for the 2007 National Book Award. I will certainly recommend it to many (but not all), of my book-loving friends. I look forward to more books by this talented new author. Personally, I hope he sticks to this unique hybrid format, but if he branches out into new territory next time, I'll happily tag along. He's certainly made it to my "must-read" list.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Best book I've read this year and last

By Laoshi

So many qualities that usually exist in books that I love I found in Fieldwork: stories about foreign cultures, stories about expats, has something to say about life and life in a foreign country (espec. non-western country), I can learn something about another subject - the writer is not just a novelist but has expertise in another field (i.e. anthropology, linguistics), interesting and realistic characters, decent prose and a good story that holds one's attention from beginning to end, a story that doesn't fall apart at the end like so many books written by first-time writers, an unpredictable ending.

I am not sure you can really appreciate this book if you haven't lived for an extended time in Asia, Africa or South America. The writer really captures what it is like to be an expat or a former expat. Throughout the book I kept on saying yes, yes, that's it, that is exactly what it's like. The longer you stay in a foreign country, the less you feel you understand about that culture. The difficulty in returning home - no one cares about your stories and finding yourself struggling to fit in a society where all people care about it how big their flat screen tv is or how much they have in their 401K.

I loved the stuff about Malinowski, anthropology and linguistics. I found it informative and it really added to the story and the understanding of Martiya and Mischa.

I really look forward to reading more from this writer. I hope he continues with the same subject matter. There aren't enough books about Americans interactions with foreign cultures. I have to say I had a good laugh at his description of all the old white American males and their young Thai wives. I could say more about this but I don't want to offend anyone. But totally spot on!!!

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