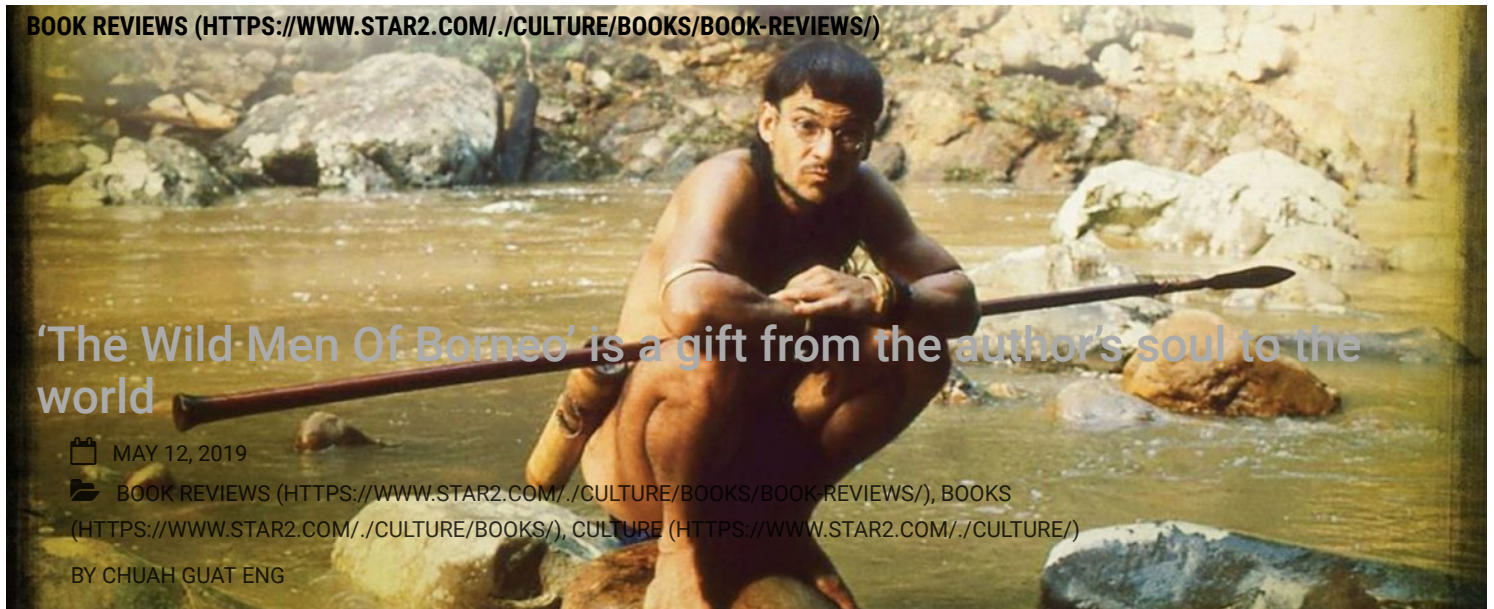




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At the heart of every good story, it's been said, is a mystery. For us in Malaysia, there is probably no mystery more haunting than that of someone walking into the thick, green, tangled depth of one of our jungles, never to be seen again.

In Carl Hoffman's *The Last Wild Men Of Borneo*, the central mystery is Bruno Manser, the young Swiss who turned up in Sarawak in the mid-1980s, lived among the Penan people for nearly two decades, adopted their nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle, drew public attention as an anti-logging activist fighting for the preservation of the Penan's traditional lands and way of life, and who, one day in early 2000, walked into the jungle and vanished without a trace.

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Today, his most tangible and enduring legacy is the Bruno Manser Fund and the environmental work it supports.

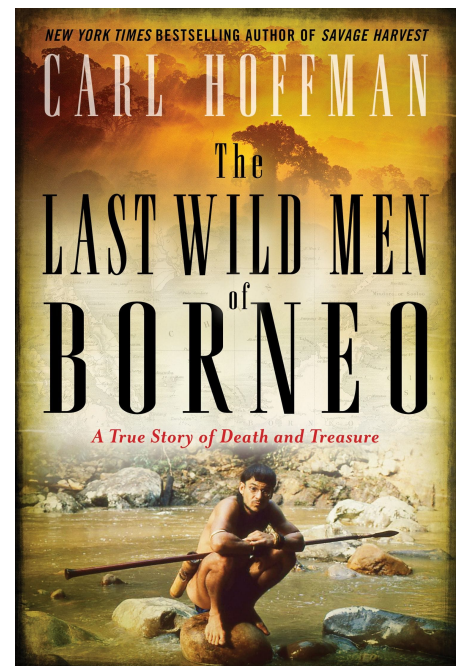
This is not the first time Hoffman, a former contributing editor to *National Geographic Traveler*, has dealt with such a mystery. His earlier book, the *New York Times* bestseller, *Savage Harvest* (2014), tells of his journey into the heart of the mystery surrounding the 1961 disappearance of Michael Rockefeller, last seen in former Dutch New Guinea while on a quest for tribal artefacts for his father's Museum of Primitive Art.

A major theme running through *Savage Harvest* is the paradox of the West's fascination with and commercialisation of tribal art. This theme is taken up again in *The Last Wild Men Of Borneo*, in the figure of Michael Palmieri, an American Vietnam War draft dodger turned treasure hunter who became enviably wealthy from supplying museums and galleries in the West with tribal artifacts from Borneo. The book is thus not just about Manser; it is also about Palmieri.

The most striking and pleasing aspect of this nonfiction work is its literary quality, immediately discernible in its structure. The main body of the narrative is divided into three parts: "Rupture", "Immersion", and "Return". These words signify the different stages of what is usually known as "the mythic journey" or "the quest" – the break from the ordinary world, an immersion in a strange new world, and a return to the ordinary world after many adventures. It is the basic structure of myths, legends, fairytales, and, indeed, of most stories told today, whether orally, in writing, or in movies.

The three words remind us that the book is about adventurers in strange new lands, but they also teasingly remind us of our tendency to see men like Manser and Palmieri as heroes.

I say "teasingly" because, far from romanticising the two men, the narrative's main thrust is a resolute unravelling of all the stories we have heard of brave heroes coming out of the West to conquer and "civilise" the East. This Hoffman does, not through polemical argument but by simply presenting the fruits of his research: excerpts from Manser's diaries and letters;



conversations with Palmieri; interviews with Manser's family, friends, and even chance acquaintances. The result is that we see these men as human beings with strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities like everyone else.

There is, of course, a third adventurer in the book, and that is the author, who describes his experiences as he travels to remote places along routes Palmieri and Manser had traversed, including living and trekking through the jungle with a group of nomadic Penan.

These descriptions are a joy to read because everything – people, objects, and processes (eg, the construction of a Penan temporary shelter) – is observed with a fine eye for detail and told with the precision of a writer who cares about words.

*The Last Wild Men Of Borneo* is not a book to hurry through, not just because it is written with such care, but also because it contains much wide-ranging knowledge and many thought-provoking ideas.

One example must suffice. As types of the Western adventurer, Palmieri and Manser are as different from each other as the two poles of a spectrum. On one end is Manser, who gives himself wholly to what he finds and seeks to preserve it intact. On the other end is Palmieri, who takes away the most valuable of what he finds, to enrich himself.

But are things that simple? Do people like Manser have the right to deny people like the Penan the benefits and conveniences of Western-style development and progress?

And can it be argued that people like Palmieri and his clients are doing posterity a service by preserving tribal art that would otherwise be left to rot in the jungles?

It is the presence of such meditative explorations throughout the narrative that makes one feel that in writing *The Last Wild Men Of Borneo*, the author has made a gift of his soul to the world.

It is an excellent book. Read it.

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## The Last Wild Men Of Borneo: A True Story Of Death And Treasure

**Author:** Carl Hoffman

**Publisher:** William Morrow, nonfiction adventure

# 10

## Summary

A journalist follows in the footsteps of two Western adventurers who fell in love with the jungles of Borneo and its native peoples' culture.

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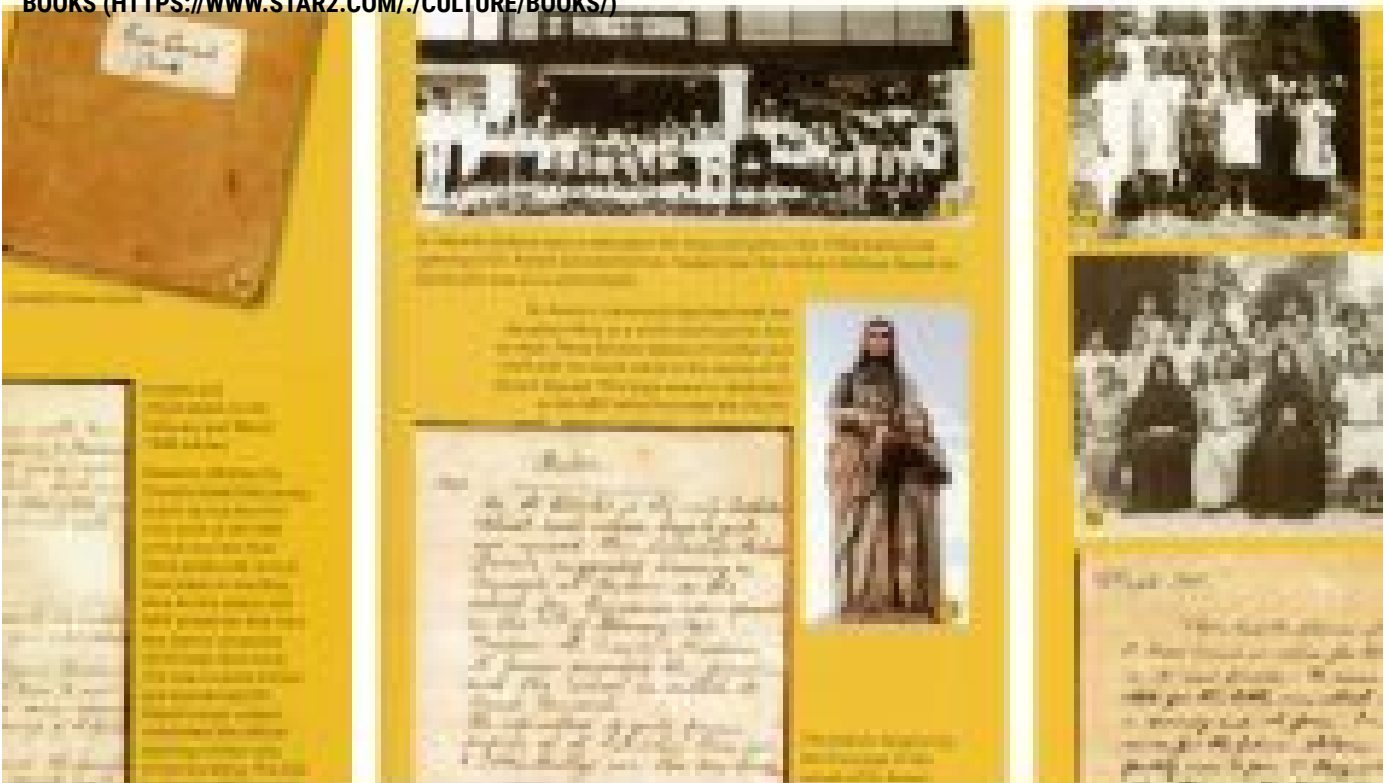
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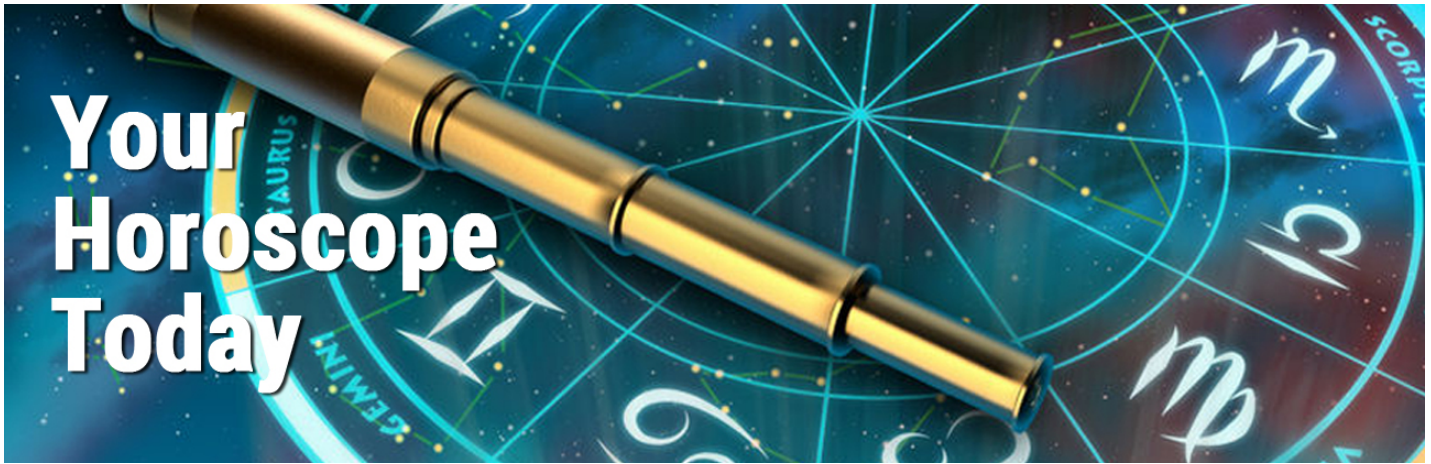
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