

Book Review – *The Last of the Tribe: The Epic Quest to Save a Lone Man in the Amazon*

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Monte Reel's thesis in the book, *The Last of the Tribe: The Epic Quest to Save a Lone Man in the Amazon*, is that everyone – no matter if they are isolated and alone or surrounded by others – should have the rights to live in peace and to choose how they want to live. Reel focuses on how members of the National Indian Foundation's (FUNAI) "first contact" teams can save a lone Indian from ranchers, loggers, and assimilation without the use of forced contact or confrontation. The book's main actors grapple with whether or not contact must be made in order to save the lone Indian, who is the last of his tribe living in the rainforest of Brazil's Rondonia province. The book deals with the conflicting ideas of whether it's in the best interest of the Indian to leave him alone and allow him the option of making contact with the outside world, or if FUNAI should force contact in order to protect the Indian from harm and human rights violations.

The book starts off with two men, Marcelo and Altair, on a journey to confirm a rumor about a wild man who is believed to be an Indian. After finding an abandoned hut that is only large enough to house a single person, they believe these rumors are true. They realize this Indian belongs to an undocumented tribe because his abandoned huts always include a rectangular hole inside, with fibers hung from sticks over the hole. Specialists theorize that these fibers are a hammock used for sleeping, and note that this is the only Indian known to dig this type of hole. They also discover many holes

around the huts, with sharp objects sticking out from the bottoms; specialists speculate that he digs these in order to catch prey. This information launches an expedition to locate the Indian and preserve land in order for him to live in peace. Marcelo, Altair, and Vincent Carelli (equipped with a video camera for documenting what they find) take off in search of the lone Indian. The team has experience making first contact with indigenous tribes: FUNAI established contact with a tribe of Kanoe Indians, for example, where they met Pura, only one of the five surviving Indians of his tribe. Pura accompanies them on their journey to find this lone Indian.

Although Brazil is undergoing rapid economic growth, deforestation is prohibited on land that is designated as Indian Territory. If FUNAI is able to find the lone Indian, they can then report his existence and mark off land for him to live peacefully for the rest of his life. As one can imagine, ranchers and loggers are not fond of this. Some accuse Marcelo of planting different Indians himself on lands that were previously believed to be free of Indian existence. Throughout the book, Marcelo and Altair are both accused of improper actions. These accusations are aimed at stopping their work, since no land can be set aside for a single man unless FUNAI can make contact and document the unique tribe.

FUNAI teams eventually have several encounters with the lone Indian, yet every time he is resistant to making contact. During the first encounter, the Indian holds an arrow up for hours, pointing at whoever comes too close to his hut. The Indian refuses to accept any gifts from the men for a very long time. Years later, a man named Sydney Possuelo takes over the task of monitoring the lone Indian and sends his son, Orlando, on a mission to establish contact. Like Marcelo and Altair, Sydney believes that leaving Indians alone is the best policy for protecting them, but documentation of his existence allows FUNAI to legally protect the lone Indian's homeland. When Orlando's team discovers the Indian in his hut, the Indian retaliates by shooting one of the men in the chest with his arrow. As a result of these actions, the lone Indian's land is finally protected. In January 2007, his land was declared property

of the Union to be protected until the end of the Indian's life. In other words, the lone Indian will now be able to live in peace without fear of ranchers and loggers. The lone Indian is, in effect, recognized as a tribe of one. FUNAI's attorney states that, "A single individual can be considered a 'people' if he is the only remnant of his culture and ethnic group, and is distinct from the national collective in his customs and traditions" (p. 220).

By writing about FUNAI's process of contacting Indians and documenting their different lifestyles, Reel shows the struggle that Marcelo and Altair went through to determine "how much of their culture they should share with the recently contacted tribes, and how much they should shield from them" (p. 89). Members of the contact front wondered if it was such a bad thing to leave gifts like machetes and axes, for example, for Indians to use while working and making things such as arrows. By giving the Indians these gifts, hours were shaved off of the day-long task of making just one arrow. Would it be cruel to stand by and watch an Indian, such as Pura, spend unnecessary hours on one project when several hours could be taken away by giving him a machete? Would giving Indians modern objects destroy parts of their culture? As Reel discusses in *The Last of the Tribe*, the answer to these questions is self-determination: it should be the Indian's decision whether or not they want to accept and use the gifts. This is one way that Reel was able to achieve the objective of his thesis, which was to illustrate that everyone should have the rights to live in peace and to choose how they want to live.

Marcelo's opinions about protecting Indians also helps Reel frame his thesis. Marcelo believes that "if some Indians wanted to cut themselves off from the rest of society and others wanted to fully integrate their tribes into the modern world, so be it...but *they* should have the freedom to make that choice"(p.109). Reel writes that Indians have the right to succeed and fail in this world just like anyone else, and that they should be able to do so without modern interference. The group is faced with a paradox when dealing with the lone Indian. The purpose of the contact front is to serve as a guardian for

Indian tribes. With the lone Indian, however, they need to contact him so they can protect his right to be alone. FUNAI needs proof of his existence, including documentation of his language and lifestyle. In order to attain these things, FUNAI must contact the lone Indian, who simply wants to be left alone. As ironic as it may be, members believe that the Indian's safety depends on making contact. But is that really in the best interest of the Indian? What happened to the ideal of self-determination and the belief that contact should be the Indian's choice?

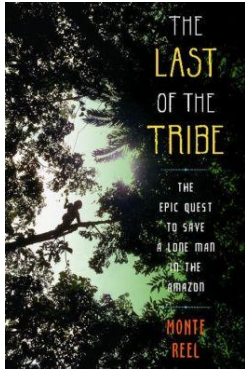
Unfortunately, few people are concerned with the lone Indian's fate; Reel uses an example of an isolated bird to compare the availability of compassion for wildlife versus "endangered" human beings. Reel writes about the Spix's Macaw, a long-tailed blue parrot that depends on the rare *caraiqueira* tree. The bird was believed to be extinct until one was spotted in the rainforest. People all over the world wanted to preserve this bird as the last of its species, nicknaming it "Mr. Lonely" (p. 173). People were distraught when the last Spix's Macaw perished soon after its discovery, probably due to wild game hunting, yet today few care about the lone Indian who is isolated in the rainforest. People care more about economic growth and obtaining the land he lives on. Ranchers and loggers are willing to use scare tactics and even kill Indians in order to force them off of land. By telling this story, Reel is trying to raise the questions: What makes an isolated bird so much better than an isolated human being? Why should people fight to save a bird's life and not the life of an Indian?

Reel uses empathy not only to relate to the lone Indian personally, but also to help others relate and feel sympathetic towards the lone Indian. He writes about how "the thought of him existing within a vacuum of complete solitude, day after day, week after week, *year after year*, without the companionship of another soul, without any communication whatsoever, boggled the mind" (p.162). Although it is hard to imagine what such circumstances would be like, readers must consider that this is the way the lone Indian chooses to live. He is given plenty of chances to reach out and accept the FUNAI

contact front as friends, but he chooses not to. He simply acknowledges them and continues on his way. Isolation may be what the Indian wants and, if that is what he chooses, shouldn't that be respected? Reel writes that the answer to this question is "yes"; isolation may not be what we would personally choose, but our personal preferences do not give us the right to choose for another.

This choice differs between Indians, as Reel illustrates with the case of Carapiru. Carapiru was an isolated Indian that was discovered hiding in a bush after fleeing attacking ranchers and loggers years earlier. Carapiru is "a living example of how an isolated Indian can emerge from solitude and readapt to community, if handled properly" (p.192). Unlike the lone Indian, Carapiru ran to a search party with open arms and chose to make contact. He learned the modern way of life, yet still retained some aspects of his previous life in the rainforest. Rather than sleeping in a bed, for instance, he sleeps in a hammock in his room. Although he is a prime example of an isolated Indian adapting to modern life, this was Carapiru's choice. The lone Indian, however, makes it perfectly clear – by his defensiveness and constant running from contact – that he does not want to be bothered by the outside world. Reel makes the strong claim that this choice should be respected.

I would definitely recommend reading *The Last of the Tribe*. It not only opens one's eyes to what is going on in the world (including how complicated and unfortunate some circumstances may be), but it also helps us to better understand the rights of all people. Whether someone is an isolated Indian or a modern person surrounded by friends and family, everyone should have the ability to live the life of their choosing. The book is thoroughly researched and descriptively written. Reel, who is a journalist, interviewed the main actors in his book to recount the events in detail. His use of back-stories, personal histories, character development, and political context skillfully builds the narrative. This book is one that gets the reader personally and emotionally involved in the story, from the actions of land-greed ranchers and loggers to the diligent contact front members hoping to protect Indians from destruction.



Book Information

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