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The Shark God

Encounters with Ghosts and Ancestors in the South Pacific

Charles Montgomery

“As delicate and impressively beautiful as any essay of exploration that I have read in recent years . . . the quality of [Montgomery’s] prose seems matched only by the wisdom of his observations.”

– Simon Winchester, author of *A Crack at the Edge of the World*

“Beautifully written and utterly astounding A study in the transforming power of myth, and the unpredictable consequences of colliding cultures, [THE SHARK GOD] is superb.”

– Maclean's (Canada)

THE SHARK GOD: Encounters with Ghosts and Ancestors in the South Pacific

(HarperCollins; July 2006; \$24.95), the first book from multiple award-winning journalist

Charles Montgomery, is a spellbinding amalgam of history, religion, travel reportage,

anthropology and memoir. Winner of Canada’s prestigious Charles Taylor Prize for Literary

Nonfiction and the Hubert Evans Prize for nonfiction, Montgomery writes with unrivaled insight

about his journey to Melanesia to explore the modern day clash between Christianity and pre-

Christian pagan beliefs – a quest that brings him face to face with his own family’s past

complicity in paradoxes that still shape culture and religion on these remote islands today.

Montgomery was a child when he first discovered the diaries of his great-grandfather, Henry Hutchinson Montgomery, a Victorian bishop and missionary to Melanesia at the height of the British Empire. Captivated by the stories of blood sacrifice and magic his great grandfather encountered on the islands, the younger Montgomery begins his own journey, first to the libraries of Oxford and then to the South Pacific itself, where he follows his ancestor's route in search of remnants of the past.

What Montgomery first encounters in modern day Vanuatu is both fascinating and discomfiting. He enters a world caught between the primitive and the modern, where satellite television coexists with shell money, and Sunday prayers blend with pagan rites. Even islanders who ardently profess their Christian faith will not let go of *kastom*, the old ways. They sacrifice pigs to shark spirits and ancestors. They create charms to draw good luck—and to curse enemies. Some have woven their two religions together to create entirely new messiahs: On one island, hundreds pray for the second coming of the God of America, a Jesus-like figure who promised to arrive on a great white ship loaded with cargo. In a *Heart of Darkness*-like trek to find the island's latest cult leader, Montgomery seeks out and confronts the unlikely-named Prophet Fred, rumored to work miracles from his perch on the flank of an active volcano.

Moving from island to island, Montgomery discovers a world inextricably changed by the intrusion of the white man, but in ways more strange than anything the missionaries could have imagined. As the author roots through island past—and his own—he is drawn deeper and deeper into the world of myth and miracles. His search finally leads him to Guadalcanal, where locals insist that a mystical band of monks has employed magic to enforce a tenuous peace among gun-

wielding militants. When six of these monks are massacred by a local warlord, Montgomery is forced to confront his own notions about magic, myth and faith itself.

Quill & Quire called **THE SHARK GOD** “one of the most thought-provoking accounts of contemporary religions published in the last few years,” and Montgomery’s journey itself turns out to be a metaphor for the transforming power of story. But **THE SHARK GOD** works on many narrative levels – historical, mythic, psychological, as well as spiritual – becoming ultimately a riveting addition to the library of classic literature about the strange and alluring mystique of the South Pacific. A talented young writer makes a dazzling debut with this highly accomplished, adventurous book.

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