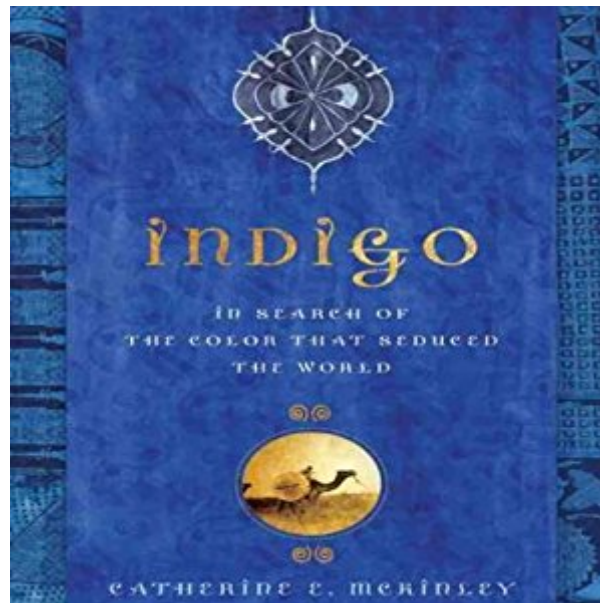




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Indigo: In Search Of The Color That Seduced The World



Synopsis

Brimming with rich, electrifying tales of the precious dye and its ancient heritage, Indigo is also the story of a personal quest: Catherine McKinley is the descendant of a clan of Scots who wore indigo tartan; Jewish "rag traders"; a Massachusetts textile factory owner; and African slaves - her ancestors were traded along the same Saharan routes as indigo, where a length of blue cotton could purchase human life. McKinley's journey in search of beauty and her own history leads her to the West African women who dye, trade, and wear indigo - women who unwittingly teach her that buried deep in the folds of their cloths is all of destiny and the human story.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have nothing personal against Ms. McKinley, but I suspect the reason this book has 60+ reviews and her other two books have only 1 or 2 is due to the deceptive marketing of this particular work. Buyer beware: the book's cover description, 'In Search of the Color that Seduced the World', leads one to assume that the main subject of the book will actually be about the color indigo's historical legacy and manufacture. Additionally, clicking on the sample of the book allows you to read the ONLY part of the book that's actually about indigo: the prologue. The correct description is on the Publisher's Weekly summation: "In this memoir of longing, community, and personal maturation, McKinley half African-American by birth, adopted and raised by white parents who were plant devotees, seeks her roots..." I suspect that those who prefer literary memoir and consider non-fiction to be dry will find this an unexpected treasure. However, I prefer entertainingly written non-fiction and was sorely disappointed. To add insult to injury, this is an astonishingly boring travelogue that

jumps around a lot and attempts to involve us in a narrative that is only connected by a gossamer thread to anything related to the book's title.

Unfortunately, Catherine McKinley's *Indigo* is another one of those books that could go grossly overlooked because it's informative. Truly her search for indigo revealed the severe tie between cloth and world history everywhere. A reader will get much more than the story of indigo in the world of textiles. In this narrative ethnography, full of desire and color, the reader will be introduced to the Nigerian medical doctor who discovers a cure for AIDS but then just a few pages later the reader gets folded back into cloth while learning that the Netherlands was the fourth-largest, slave-trading nation whose Dutch textiles made up 57 percent of the goods exchanged for human lives during their slave trade. Cloth constituted more than 50 percent of European exports to West Africa on a whole by the late 1600s so that we see the incredible importance of cloth to West Africans that they would exchange lives for it. Concurrently, abolitionists over in America were staging boycotts of indigo and all of this information goes very well towards feeding the reader with the zeitgeist of the times. Cloth takes on its own persona in "Indigo."

McKinley makes cloth come alive as she explores its processes and its history in pre-colonial Africa as well. She effectively runs through the various types of cloth that were exchanged from East to West and North to South. Everyone around the world loved cloth in all its colors and textures. She also succinctly points out on a general note that the making of the "beauty" during colonialism is also the making of the crisis that consumed many West African countries post-colonialism. Every bit of indigo McKinley can find not only furthers her Fulbright research but furthers her insatiable desire to 'feel' the history of the people when it is not readily communicable from its owners. She believes in understanding by osmosis so that when she lacks the information to steer her in the right direction for more culture, rather than assuming there is no more knowledge to be gotten, her self-determination, sheer faith, and belief in the power of cloth pushes her straight through to the places she needs to go and the people she needs to meet over and over again throughout her West African journey. The textile cultures McKinley discovers have been in West Africa for a very long time and as the needs of a global economy loom, she explains how that has necessitated that many West Africans start to place the pursuit of financial gain over the maintenance of laborious yet ancient and rare textile traditions. These cloth traditions do more than impart beauty but also translate generational heritage as indigo has been included in dowries passed down from mother to daughter and the symbolism embedded in the cloth itself expresses the various cultural values from ethnicity to ethnicity and country to country that she explores.

I read Catherine McKinley's "Indigo: In Search of the Color That Seduced the World" not knowing quite what to expect. I knew it was a memoir and a searching, but didn't know it was also deep research into Africa and the history and context of African textiles and culture. To me this is the PERFECT kind of memoir or story. It combines very personal passions and uncertainties along with a deep and lived experience. Because Ms. McKinley was doing a kind of ethnographic/qualitative/experimental cultural studies/memoir, many readers will not get it. This type of writing requires a sophisticated and poetic sensibility along with an interest in examining the connections between culture and the self. I found Ms. McKinley's writing to be a type of "indigo" in itself: seductive and elusive. Yes, there are some typo/ editing issues about the dates of things--and these can be easily remedied with some cursory research--as reviewers have done here. Yet, history and culture are not only about facts and figures but are also about passions, questions and interpretations. This travelogue/memoir/cultural exploration of African textiles is an interdisciplinary journey in the experience of research of both oneself and the culture one she is exploring. Therefore, there are many fibers being woven into the cloth--it is more like a tapestry than a plain weave. Many pieces are being held at one time and are brought into the mix when their time has come. Ms. McKinley's writing is fresh, thoughtful, and open. We go on a journey with her. We feel the shame of obsession and public humiliation with her. We fear the war with her as she walks down the road trying to get to the high end hotel with her American companion. We see Africa from many sides. We see the divisions between the elites and people; between the city-folk and bushmen; between those who know, or claim to know, and those who must pretend they don't know. Because this type of interdisciplinary writing is a new form of writing, readers will have to engage with it differently than more authoritative/authoritarian styles. It is open. It is a journey. It is an exploration, an adventure. It demands both openness and critical thinking (different than being critical, btw). It asks the reader to accompany the author on her journey and to be open to the adventure of it. I was thrilled to read the book! I couldn't put it down! I felt as if I had gone on the journey with her. Her work has inspired me to learn more about Africa, and African textiles.

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